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ERSIELIA

By  
THE AUTHOR OF  
MY LITTLE LADY



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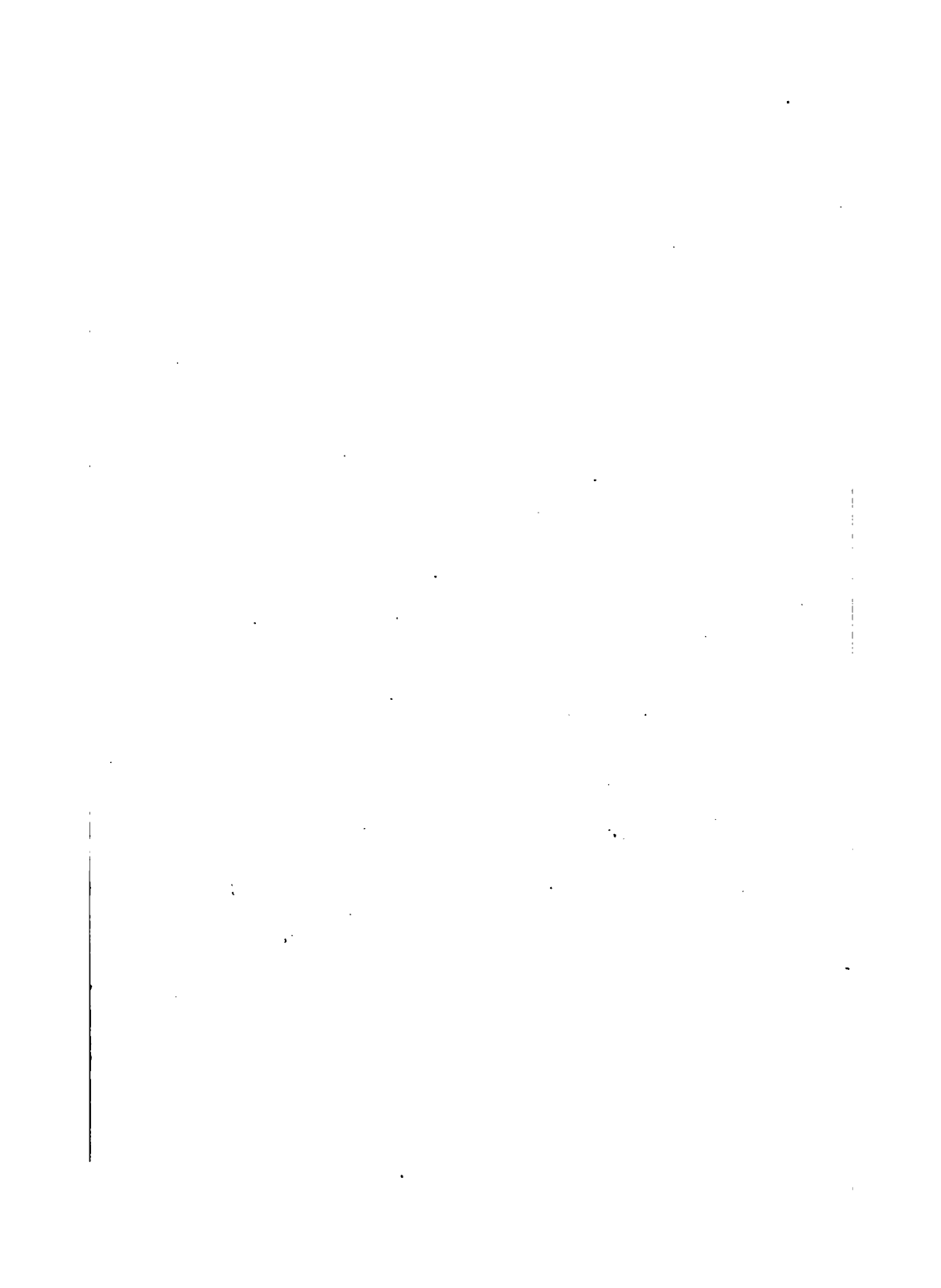




ERSILIA.

—

VOL. III.



# ERSILIA.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF  
"MY LITTLE LADY."

"O fearful meditation! where, alack,  
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?  
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?  
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?  
O none, unless this miracle have might,  
That in black ink my love may still shine bright."

SHAKESPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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# ERSILIA.

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## CHAPTER I.

### MRS. GREY PAYS A VISIT.

IT would not be easy to give any definite account of the weeks that followed. How Mr. Fleming lived through them, I hardly know; something of energy, perhaps, aroused by the very weight of the blow came to sustain him—as a man will put forth his whole strength to gain breathing space beneath the heavy fallen stone that would otherwise crush the life out of him. And yet it was hardly energy,

rather a dream or stupor in which he lived apart, and with which his actions were only half-associated. After the first day, he began to paint again, sometimes remaining at his easel for hours together; but his pictures made little progress, and at other times he would sit almost the whole day in unbroken silence before the fire. He had given up his journey to Florence; he could not leave Paris then, he told Humphrey briefly, without further comment. He saw almost no one; now and then an old friend came in, or some one was admitted on indispensable business; but for the most part, the door was closed against all comers, and a world-forsaken silence, as it were, reigned in the studio. Humphrey alone hardly ever left him, even sleeping at the house after a time, old Marguerite, the cook, who was heart broken at the course affairs had taken, turning out of her room on his behalf.

At first the lad was doubtful whether his presence were a relief or an oppression to his master, until one afternoon, being detained at a picture-dealer's, he was absent for some hours. On his return, he came in quietly, as usual; but in a moment Mr. Fleming came up to him. "Where have you been, Humphrey?" he said. "I thought you were never coming back."

Humphrey told him, and also what had detained him.

"I missed you," he answered. "You are necessary to me, my boy. Do not leave me for longer than you can help."

No news, no word reached them from Ersilia. Sometimes Humphrey thought of writing himself to La Chênaie, then hesitating, not daring to speak of it to Mr. Fleming, put it off from day to day. But this sense of silence, of separation, weighed upon him with a dreariness that cannot be told. As he and Mr. Fleming worked

together in the studio, sometimes hardly exchanging two words in the course of the day, the sounds from the outer world would strike with a sudden harshness and incongruity on the ear, as though penetrating some lonely tomb. Every day they went together at the same hour to dine at the nearest restaurant, then returning, the evening was spent as the day had been, till, retiring for the night, Humphrey would hear his master pacing up and down his room till the early hours of the morning.

On the rare occasions that Mr. Fleming broke silence by more than a few words, it was to question Humphrey about M. Rossel. "I wish I had seen him—I wish I had seen him," he would say, in a troubled voice, as though perplexed by some inward vision; "describe him to me, Humphrey." So persistent was his strange hankering on this point that the lad one

day tried to draw M. Rossel's face from memory ; but the result was not very successful. Mr. Fleming, who was walking up and down the room, paused as Humphrey laid the drawing down. "Is it like?" he said. "Don't show it to me if it is not. It will only confuse me more."

This sort of life, in which time seemed measured, not by hours and minutes, but by pulsations of feeling, appears, on looking back, to have lasted for many weeks ; but in reality it can have been hardly a month before a change came. It began with a ring at the door-bell one day late in February, followed by a voice that Humphrey at once recognised inquiring for Mr. Fleming. Old Marguerite happened to be out, and the little girl who occasionally helped her had received no instructions about visitors.

"It is Mrs. Grey," said Humphrey.  
"You don't want to see her, sir, do you?"

I will tell Jeanne not to admit her."

"Mrs. Grey?" said Mr. Fleming, vaguely, "that woman? She must come in, if she is there, Humphrey; it makes no difference." Indeed, it was too late to interfere, for the door had opened, and Mrs. Grey, sweeping and gracious, was already in the room. Mr. Fleming looked up and shook hands with her, then went on with his painting, leaving the task of entertaining her to Humphrey.

"It is very good of you to admit me so early," she said, "but the days are still so short, and I was afraid I might not find you at home. It is so long, so very long since I was at your studio—not since last November, I think—and I have heard so much of Mr. Fleming's pictures lately. I was at M. G——'s atelier only yesterday—have you seen his pictures, Mr. Randolph? He has some charming little *genre* things, but

nothing to be compared to these—nothing—‘if you want to see some really fine pictures, Madame,’ he said, ‘you should go to my friend Fleming’s studio; they are worth looking at.’ And so they are, indeed—what colouring, what a delicious sentiment—might I trouble you for a chair, Mr. Randolph? I could sit and look at these for hours.”

He gave her a chair, and sitting down, she carefully levelled her eye-glass at the painting before her, and let her eyes freely roam about the room. To see Mrs. Grey, all unchanged, in the midst of a world otherwise so changed, affected Humphrey with a grim sense of the irony of things. In half a minute she was up again, and carrying her chair with her, had dropped down in front of another picture.

“This is yours, Mr. Randolph?” she said. “From Dante? I do not remem-

ber the passage—in fact, though I am almost ashamed to own it, I never read Dante. I have a very beautiful copy given me by an Italian friend, but somehow I have never been able to devote the necessary time to studying it. I look forward to reading it later on with Rose. Beautiful—most beautiful, Mr. Randolph; there is something so exceedingly touching and sweet—and—and—touching in the girl's face, it quite appeals to one; surely, it is a little like—ah, that reminds me, Mr. Randolph; may I not see that charming portrait of the Princess Zaraikine that Mr. Fleming was at work on last November? It promised so exceedingly well."

"It is not finished," said Humphrey.  
"How is Miss Grey?"

"Charlotte, do you mean? Oh, she is very well, thank you. She wanted to come with me to-day, but I knew," lower-

ing her voice, "that Mr. Fleming is—that he would, perhaps, not care to see many visitors at present."

"I think Miss Grey would have been very welcome," answered Humphrey. "If you will let me turn this a little more to the light, Mrs. Grey, I think you will see it better."

"Thank you, it does perfectly—perfectly. But may I really not see that portrait, Mr. Randolph? I am so much interested in that poor young thing, you know—though people do say now that there have always been some very strange stories about her, that she ran away from her husband when she was quite a young girl, and that the blame is not all on one side. One never knows."

They were at the further end of the studio, and she still spoke in a lowered voice, glancing towards Mr. Fleming the while; he gave no sign, but Humphrey

nevertheless felt certain that he heard every word.

“The Princess Zaraikine is my cousin, as you are aware,” Humphrey said in answer, “I believe that I am accurately informed as to the circumstances of her married life, and you have my authority for contradicting every word that casts the slightest shadow of blame upon her.”

“Indeed—well, no doubt, you are well informed, Mr. Randolph; and I am far from exonerating Prince Zaraikine; I have always understood that he bears the worst of characters. Still one never quite knows what to believe, and there is never smoke without some fire.”

“There would be neither smoke nor fire, Madam,” said Mr. Fleming, speaking for the first time, and coming forward, “but for a certain order of minds which lies below the level of my under-

standing, and whose delight is in inventing and retailing the basest lies. For myself, I always give those who retail them the credit of inventing them."

"Mr. Fleming, you surprise me," said Mrs. Grey, rising with some dignity, "this is language that I am *not* accustomed to. Nor do I know what you mean by lies—I know them to be truths, and I shall not hesitate to say so whenever the occasion offers." She bowed, and swept out of the room without another word. Mr. Fleming locked the door after her. I had never seen him in such a storm of anger.

"Can no one stop her? Can no one denounce her?" he said, walking up and down the room with his head between his hands. "Is nothing sacred to her? Nothing safe from her cursed lying tongue? How dare she utter a name she is not worthy even to hear pronounced? My

God, my God, that it should all have come to this——”

“She knows nothing of it,” Humphrey said at last; “it does not hurt her.”

“No”—he said, more quietly, “she knows nothing of it.” He went up to her portrait, which was leaning against the wall, and, turning it round, gazed at it with an inexpressible mournfulness. “Is it fate, Humphrey?” he said at last, “is it fate? Why must she suffer and I not help her? She needs me, as I need her, and yet Heaven and earth are not wider apart than we are with that man and her will standing between us.”

He went back to his easel without waiting for an answer, but the conversation had roused him; he could not settle to his work again. Presently he left it and began walking up and down the room with frequent pauses; at last, for the first

time in all these weeks, he proposed that they should go out.

They made their way down to the Tuileries gardens. It was a mild day, the February sun shone brightly, and presently, seated under one of the trees, Humphrey saw Charlotte Grey. He had not met her since the night of Mrs. Grey's party; she looked older, he thought, and very pale and thin, poor child. She happened to be alone just then, for her aunt was standing at some little distance talking to one of her thousand acquaintances, and she no sooner caught sight of Mr. Fleming and Humphrey advancing along the wide avenue than she jumped up and came to meet them.

"I am so glad to see you again, Mr. Randolph," she said. "I thought you had forgotten us." Then with a shy glance she turned to greet Mr. Fleming also. I think that he hardly knew her for a moment, then all at once he remembered who

she was, and Ersilia's friendship for her.

"I have not seen you for a long time, Miss Grey," he said, shaking hands with her kindly. "You are well, I hope?"

The girl did not answer. She stood glancing from one to the other with her dark soft eyes; her forlorn looks seemed to reproach Humphrey, who had hardly thought of her lately. What a tragedy it was, he could not help thinking now, that had written these lines on three sad faces looking hopelessly at each other, whilst one, never absent from their thoughts, suffered in loneliness far away. It was like meeting in some open grave, in which the dead-alive should still have hearts to throb and nerves to quiver. So they stood for a moment; then Rose came running up, and Charlotte starting, looked round for her aunt.

"I must go," she said; then drawing Humphrey a little on one side, "have you

heard anything of the Princess Zaraikine?" she said. "I had a letter from her this morning. Would you like to read it? I have it here." She put the letter into his hand as she spoke. "Do come and see us soon, Mr. Randolph," she said, looking at him wistfully; "it is so dull at home."

She ran off as her aunt approached, and Humphrey rejoined Mr. Fleming, who had turned and was walking towards the Château. He had not noticed Charlotte as she gave the letter—indeed he noticed nothing—nor would Humphrey mention it till they were at home again. Then he told him. His countenance changed; his hand shook as he held it out.

"Give it to me," he said, in a hoarse voice. A flush passed over his pale face as he saw her handwriting; he took the letter to the window, and stood there for a long time motionless. At last, without turning round, he held the paper out

that Humphrey might take it and read it also. It was getting dusk, and the lad came and stood by his master at the window to see the words.

There was not much to read. The letter was apparently in answer to one that Charlotte had written in the midst of her own troubles, and the tone of it was brave, almost cheerful, with kind words of encouragement and sympathy for the girl. About herself there was almost nothing; perhaps it was for this reason that between each line we seemed to read other words that told of loneliness and suffering. Mr. Fleming took the paper again when Humphrey had finished, and stood gazing at it a minute longer, his hand shading his eyes.

"She is ill," he said, speaking the thought that was in the mind of both; "that is not her usual handwriting. Humphrey, I must go to her, she is suffering—

Why should she suffer, my God, why should she suffer? And there is no end to it—if there were any end to it—God help us both !”

He flung himself into a chair, and for the first time in Humphrey’s presence gave way to a burst of grief terrible to witness—such grief as the lad in his inexperience had hardly imagined—the hard, hopeless grief that seems to drain the very sources of life, yet leaves everything unchanged.

After a long time he became calmer. Late in the evening, after hours of unbroken silence, he spoke again.

“This can be endured no longer,” he said; “what the end will be, God only knows—but something must be done. I cannot go to her myself—not yet—you must go, Humphrey.”

“I?” said Humphrey, startled.

“Yes; why not?” he said. “You do

not mind, my boy?" some vague memory returning.

"Mind!" answered Humphrey. Indeed it seemed to him all at once that with this course open, present endurance had in fact reached its limits. "I mind nothing but leaving you, sir," he said.

"That is no matter," Mr. Fleming answered. He began walking up and down the room again, with bent head, and a pause at each turn. "You might go to-morrow," he said, "the less delay the better; you will see if she—she will be glad to see you. There is a train leaves Paris about eleven; that will suit you best. You will get to La Chênaie about three, and you had better sleep there. The last train for Paris starts at five, which would leave you hardly sufficient time, as the house is three or four miles from the station."

"I will go, of course," said Humphrey.

A sudden dazzling came between his eyes and the paper as he sat drawing at an easel, his hand shook, he found that he could not go on. He got up and began to put away his things for the night. Mr. Fleming was still wandering up and down with a restlessness that was new in him. Presently he came and stood by Humphrey, watching the lad's movements with absent eyes.

"When does Prince Zaraikine return to Paris?" he asked.

"I don't know, I have not heard," said Humphrey, wondering at the sudden question. "One might inquire in the Rue de Seine; they would know there perhaps."

"No—no matter," said Mr. Fleming. He resumed his restless pacing, but in a moment he spoke again as though he could not help it. "I cannot see him," he said, "I wish I could see him—the man who has cursed her life—"

He broke off abruptly and left the studio, and Humphrey too, presently, went to his own room, which was next to Mr. Fleming's. The thought of the morrow filled his mind, and he could not sleep. All night he tossed and dozed and woke again, and at each waking some slight movement in the next room, the grating of a chair, a slow footstep, told him that there also was a sleepless watcher. He was in the studio earlier than usual the next morning; but Mr. Fleming was already there before him, walking up and down with the same subdued, restless excitement that Humphrey had noticed in his manner the evening before. His face was haggard, yet flushed, and his eyes looked worn and reddened from want of sleep; he had not been in bed that night.

Humphrey left the house soon after ten o'clock. His master, who had hardly spoken, except to give him one or two parting

directions, bade him a silent farewell, accompanying him to the door. The lad heard it close behind him as he went downstairs—he himself was in a state of wrought-up excitement that morning, and when he had got into the street, he turned back with an impulse he could not resist, and went upstairs to the studio again. Mr. Fleming was sitting in front of the fire, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. He had often sat so before, but the thought that he might remain there now for hours with no one to speak to him, or to rouse him, struck Humphrey like a new pain. He could not bear to leave him so; he went up to him.

“What is it, my boy?” he said, disturbed, but not looking up.

“Won’t you go out?” said Humphrey in a half-choked voice, not knowing what

to say. "I can't bear to leave you like this."

"I shall do very well," he said; "don't mind me." Then as Humphrey did not move, "Go, my boy," he said, "you will be late for the train."

There was nothing in the words, and yet Humphrey lingered, and turned to look again as he reached the door. Mr. Fleming did not move, and with a dull disquietude in his heart the lad once more left the house.

## CHAPTER II.

## AT LA CHÉNAIE.

RANDOLPH reached C——, the nearest station to La Chénaie, between two and three o'clock that afternoon. It was a small white town or rather village, lying amongst low hills; a slow stream flowed through it, crossed by a single-arched bridge; close by stood a rattling paper mill, the sole sign of life and activity in the place. Humphrey sought in vain for any ready means of conveyance, and, growing impatient at last, he obtained the

necessary directions and started on the five miles' walk to La Chênaie.

It was a mild, cloudy afternoon, with flying gleams of sunshine lighting up the wide country that stretched away for miles beneath the wide grey sky—a silent undulating land, with fields, meadows, leafless woods following the long, slow curves and slopes that sunk now and then to show a more distant range of dim blue hills beyond. The stream, marked by grassy banks and pollard willows, wandered here and there below the level of the road, and presently Humphrey came upon a water-mill set down in a hollow, and sheltered by trees. A dog barked as he approached, some children came running out of the house, a mild-eyed motherly woman stood in the doorway, the water splashed as the huge wheel boomed and turned—it was a pretty bit of life let into the midst of the still landscape, and Humphrey turned

aside to ask the woman whether he was on the right road to the château.

"It was quite right," she said. "There was a short cut across the fields, but as Monsieur was a stranger, he would do better to follow the high-road for about a mile further, and he would see the château before him. He could not mistake it, there was no other house in that direction."

"Madame—the Princess Zاراikine is at the château now," said Humphrey, hesitating over the question he longed to ask. "She is well?"

"Not well," said the woman; "but better, certainly better these last few days."

"Better! Good Heavens, she has been really ill, then!" said Humphrey. He had known it—he had known it ever since reading her letter to Charlotte; nay, he had known it all these weeks; in one brief moment he was living through long

days of anxiety and suspense. "Since when has she been ill?" he said, trying to speak calmly.

"She has been here nearly a month," said the woman, considering. "It was the Saturday after she came that she was taken ill. Some say it was the fever that was so bad in the village last year, for Madame, who has a good heart, would have all the sick people who could be moved up to the château to nurse. But she did not take it then, and I, who used to go up there to help, was never the worse for it either. But it may be, for all that; for who knows what brings the illnesses in this world? My husband now, he says it is as the wind blows, and that fever comes with one and rheumatism with another. It may be so. Who knows?"

"But she is better," said Humphrey,

with some impatience, "you say she is better?"

"Yes, Monsieur, she is much better, she goes out again now. I have not seen her myself, but my eldest son who works on the château farm goes every day to inquire. There were none but were sorry when she fell ill; every one about her loves her since she was so good at the time of the fever, though my husband does say she has all sorts of new notions, and wants to alter things that have been in his time and his father's before him. But she's young, Monsieur, that's what I say; she's very young, and strange to the place, as it were. It seems only the other day that she was no bigger than my Marie, when she used to come and stop at the château for a few weeks in the summer."

"Madame la Princesse is a saint out of Heaven," said one of the children, in her shrill little voice—a small, round thing of

seven or eight, who, with her finger in her mouth, had not ceased staring with wide blue eyes since Humphrey came up.

“Hark to Jeanne,” said the mother, stooping down to pull the child’s finger away and give an indiscriminate rub to her rosy face. “She is always there with her silly tale. She fell asleep, Monsieur, in the church one evening, and Madame found her there crying in the dark, and brought her back to the end of the path here, where she could see the light shining and run home by herself. I thought she was lost, the little fool, and had been out a dozen times to look for her, when all at once she comes running in, ‘Oh mother,’ she says, ‘the Holy Virgin, or a saint out of heaven came to me in the church, and vanished at the top of the hill there.’ I thought at first there might be something in it, for such things do sometimes happen, and why not to Jeanne as well as to

another? But it was all nonsense; Madame herself called the next day to see me and told me all about it; but Jeanne, who has never too many wits about her, has had it all mixed in her head ever since. And for that matter, Madame has a face lovely enough to have come straight from heaven, although she looks so ill."

"She was not ill then?" said Humphrey, keenly touched and interested. After the long silent pain of the last few weeks, this fresh, unconscious talk was welcome as the free twittering of birds to an escaped prisoner.

"Not to call ill, Monsieur," said the woman, "but I saw her just before she went to Paris in the autumn, and it grieved me to see her so changed now. I did not notice it at first, for she was talking to the children in her old way, she had always the pleasantest way of any lady I know; but in a minute she

sat down on this bench, and looked so pale I thought she was going to faint. She only laughed when I said so, but then I think she forgot where she was, for she sat quite still with her head leaning back against the wall, and her hands lying in her lap, looking through the trees at the stream with the saddest face I ever saw, and I have seen some sad ones in my day, Monsieur. I wondered what her trouble could be—they say her husband is come back, and that he is a bad man who will spend all her money—but I had not heard of it then. I wouldn't seem to watch her and turned away, but in a minute little Marcel, who knows no better, came running up, as children will, and began playing with her cloak, putting his cheek against it, because it was pretty and soft. I would have pulled him away, but all at once she roused herself, and took him on her knee.

‘How your little ones grow, Madame Dubois,’ she said in her cheerful way, ‘they must be great blessings to you.’ ‘No doubt they are, Madame,’ I answered, ‘but one may have too much of a blessing sometimes, as I say to my husband when the water rises and floods the kitchen.’ ‘Ah, well!’ she said, ‘but you wouldn’t know what to do without the water, or the children either,’ and with that she kissed little Marcel again, and set him down, and said she must be going. It was the next day we heard she was ill, and I have not seen her since.”

“If Monsieur would like to take the short cut across the fields,” Madame Dubois began again as Humphrey turned to go, “Jeanne can show him the way. She has to take home Madame’s laces and things: I always do her fine washing when she is at the château.”

Humphrey, in haste to find himself there now, willingly accepted the offer, and Jeanne, furnished with a basket and many instructions, and with her finger still in her mouth, trotted before him along the narrow field paths, looking back from time to time to make sure that he was following. They had not far to go; across two fields and along a short muddy lane, and then they emerged on the high road again in full view of the château.

It was a long weather-stained building standing on rising ground, with steep pointed roofs and many windows, and an old grey tower at the end. Purple-brown rolling woods sheltered it at the back; in front was a gravel terrace, with square boxes to hold orange trees, and an old stone balustrade in front. A flight of steps led down to the lower level of the rough lawn; it sloped between the

avenue and the woods that skirted it on either side, down to the stream, which, crossed by a wooden bridge, divided this part of the grounds from the fields beyond. The place looked homelike, and yet had a somewhat deserted air under the dull February sky, as places from which a master's hand has long been absent are wont to have.

Little Jeanne faithfully accompanied Humphrey to the front door, then vanished round the corner of the house to make her way in by some back entrance. Humphrey, on his side, was presently conducted through a matted hall with a pyramid of evergreens in the centre, through a long room with a billiard-table at one end, into a smaller chintz-lined drawing-room, with windows looking out on some brown flower-beds at the back and the woods rising behind. Ersilia was there, seated by the fire, turning over

some papers and parchments she had taken from a tin box that stood open beside her. She looked up inquiringly as the door opened, then seeing who it was, rose and came forward quickly with both hands extended.

"Welcome, welcome!" she said, then stopped short, the colour fading from her very lips. "There is nothing wrong—you bring no bad news?" she said.

"No, nothing—all is well," answered Humphrey hastily, divining her thought. "I am afraid I have startled you by coming unexpectedly, I should have written to let you know beforehand."

"No, no, it is good of you to come," she said, placing her cold hand in his, "come and sit down—what a surprise—what a pleasure to see you!"

Humphrey drew a chair opposite to her at the fire, but he could not speak

at first. She was so changed—he could not have believed that four weeks could so have changed her. Her face had grown thin; her brown hair lay like a heavy shadow on her delicate blue-veined temples, her lips were parched, and there was that slight contraction of the brow and nostrils that gives a look of habitual pain to the face. Only her eyes seemed to have gained an added intensity, and the sweet animation that had made the ever-varying charm of her countenance was not wholly gone even now, for it sprang from the unceasing thought for others that was the strongest habit of her life.

“ You look tired and cold, Humphrey,” she was saying now. “ What time did you leave Paris? I will order some refreshments for you at once.”

Her hand was on the bell, but he stopped her. “ Don’t ring,” he said,

"I don't want anything really, I did not leave Paris till eleven." Then looking not at her, but at the fire, for one glance had taken in the forlorn change that cut him to the heart, "You have been ill," he said, "I was told at the mill that you had had the fever."

"Not so bad as that," she answered, "a feverish cold—influenza—I hardly know what; but I am well again now, as you see." She collected her scattered papers and put them on one side; then leaning forward with her hands tightly clasped, "Tell me everything, Humphrey," she said, with a look in her eyes that told him as no words could have done, the hunger for tidings that had grown from one slow hour to another through these weeks.

He told her everything; each day that had passed since she went away—for

monotonous as the days had been, each had a distinctive character of its own for him then. She put hardly any questions, only, when he paused, her grey eyes, with their heart-constraining gaze, still asked for more. They seemed to gather a softer light as he went on, as one who, after long stumbling through dark places, should once more see a beloved face, though it were through mists and driving rain. Humphrey related each fact as it came, only tried to soften his own strong impression of Mr. Fleming's silent desolation, passing lightly indeed over the last twenty-four hours, which had left an undefined weight on his own mind. I do not know that it was of much use; I believe she divined all that he would not say, for in her memory lay an hour of which he had no knowledge—that in which she had told Mr. Fleming that they must part. She did not speak at

once when he had finished, but in a minute she held out her hand to him again.

"Thank you," she said; then, after a moment's pause, "God bless you for coming, Humphrey—the time has seemed very long."

She sat silent awhile, her cheek resting on her hand, "Mr. Fleming has been painting, you say?" she went on, presently.

"Yes; he has been painting a good deal," said Humphrey.

"That is well—what pictures do you say he has been at work on?"

He told her, and then again there was a silence. Now that the simple narrative of facts was over, it seemed as if there were no words to utter that would not be painful. Ersilia was the first to rouse herself.

"Shall we go out?" she said, rising,

“You will sleep here to-night, of course, and we shall have time to go into the garden and the woods before it gets dark; there are one or two points of view I should like you to see. Aunt Mathilde is out this afternoon; she has gone to see one of our neighbours—we have a few neighbours,” she said, smiling a little, “though they live a good way off—but she will be in presently.”

The garden lay to the left of the Château, sheltered to the north by a row of lime trees. It was a damp overgrown place merging into the farm-yard beyond, and Ersilia, as they walked along, spoke of what she wished to have done to it next summer. They made the circuit of the farm buildings, standing grey and homelike in the midst of apple-trees and wide pastures, then, crossing the terrace again, passed on into the woods beyond. It seemed easier to wander there than to

sit in silence with hearts full of sad memories they dared not speak of.

No present pain, no dread of the future, no thought even of his master who was never absent from his thoughts, could prevent Humphrey's finding that hour an exquisite one. The sun was setting as they passed along the terrace, which lay fronting the full light of the western sky, and through openings in the wood they could still catch glimpses here and there of a clear yellow glow above the far blue horizon. Overhead the breaking clouds showed a pale blue sky between grey flakes, and presently a thin moon shone down, casting a faint radiance crossed by interlacing shadows on their path. The birds were silent, and there were no leaves but the leaves of last year that lay thick beneath their feet, and rustled brown and crisp in sheltered hollows above their heads; but the first primroses

were scattered like mild fallen stars, and everywhere the faint stirring of the wind was as the stirring of the new year's growth in bud and twig and branch. Humphrey walked on as through an enchanted land that had neither beginning nor ending—it was only an hour's dream snatched in the midst of sorrow, dreamt in the light of the grey eyes at his side—it faded as they presently emerged upon more open ground, and in the clearer light he could see plainly the pale changed face whose pain no dream could come to soften.

Ersilia had spoken little since they came out, except to question Humphrey in her old kind way about his pictures and his work; but now they paused at the edge of a deep natural pool where the dim lights and shadows of the upper world wavered away into mysterious darkness, and whence down a long opening in the

trees they could see the Château lights shining through leafless branches.

"I came upon some old designs the other day," Ersilia said, "for altering and improving the Château grounds. Amongst other things it was proposed to plant this opening as a formal alley, with a marble fountain here in the place of this pool."

"I like it better as it is," said Humphrey, "don't you?"

"The design looked well on paper," she answered, "but it is not one of the things I should care to set about doing. There are others more urgent that ought to be, indeed must be attended to—when I quite know how to get things done," she said, smiling a little.

"You still find difficulties in your way then?" said Humphrey.

"Yes," she said, walking slowly onwards towards the Château, "there are

difficulties, and more than I had at first imagined. Lebrun is honest as he can be, but he is obstinate, and getting old, and every day I find something that is going wrong through neglect. Some things I am obliged to insist on, but that creates discontent, and makes the next step all the harder."

"I should think it would be best to get rid of him altogether," said Humphrey, "and make a fresh beginning with somebody else."

"No, I cannot do that at present," she answered, "nor, as things are, do I know that it would do much good. I think there is no such thing in life, Humphrey, as a really fresh beginning. Every action seems weighted with all that has gone before for good or evil, and it is best, if possible, to work with the materials one has; so it seems to me, at least. And I am not afraid but that all will come right

in time—if no other complications arise.”

“You think of remaining on here then?” said Humphrey. It was a thoughtless question, that he repented the next moment having asked.

“I am not sure,” she said hastily, “I cannot look forward—I cannot make any plans at present. I live—I awake in the morning, and I am alive——”

She broke off abruptly, and turned away her head, and Humphrey, angry at his own stupidity, walked on in silence at her side. They had reached the end of the glade by this time and were on the terrace again, where the shadow of the château roofs and tower lay defined by the faint moonlight. The deep bark of a dog was heard, answered by a shriller chorus from the farmyard beyond; a carriage was driving away from the front door of the château, and a large wolf-

hound came bounding up to Ersilia, thrusting its head under her hand as though to receive an accustomed caress, then bounded off again, leaping and barking at the horses.

"Aunt Mathilde has come back," said Ersilia, "we must go in, Humphrey. And yet it seems a pity, it is such a lovely evening."

They stood still a moment, looking at the dying light that still lingered in the west, and the misty country spread between, then turned to go into the house. But when they were at the door Humphrey paused again. He was to leave early the next morning, he might not have another opportunity of speaking to Ersilia alone; and yet he hesitated, fearing to give her fresh pain.

"Have you—is there any message I can take to Mr. Fleming?" he said, stammering a little over his words,

"anything you would wish me to tell him?"

She did not answer at once, but even in the uncertain light he could see how her face changed and flushed.

"Oh, what can I bid you tell him?" she said at last, "what could I say that he does not know already, what words that would not seem a mockery from me to him? Oh, why did he ever know me? He was happy till I came. Who am I that I should have crossed a beautiful life——" she could not go on, she stood leaning, shaken with emotion, against the old stone wall. "Tell him," she said, recovering her voice, "tell him I have found but one clue in the darkness, that no one of God's creatures was born for despair, that we must have patience—have patience——"

She wrung her hands as he had seen her do once before, and passed on before

him into the house. In the hall they were met by Mademoiselle Mathilde, who at once began to talk and scold after her usual fashion, as she accompanied them into the drawing-room.

“Ersilia, what do you mean by being out at this time of the evening? You will certainly be ill and in bed again to-morrow. Go and lie down at once——. How do you do, Mr. Humphrey? I heard you had arrived; I am delighted to see you again. Sit down, sit down. Well, Ersilia, I found Madame de P—— at home, and she is the most charming person. I was only just in time, for they all go to Paris next week for the marriage of the second daughter to that M. de L——, you know, we so often met in the winter. She had set her heart upon a title, her mother said, otherwise——not but that there is money, plenty of money, on both sides. And the week after, the eldest daughter

makes her profession in the Ursuline Convent at D——. Madame de P—— is heart-broken; the whole family went down on their knees to her, but it was of no use. That old widow Bertrand was here just now, Ersilia. She said she wanted to speak to you; something about her house it was, I believe; but I told her you were out, and that when you came in you would be lying down till dinner-time, so that if her business was pressing, she had better go and speak to Lebrun about it. So she went away."

"Dear Aunt Mathilde," said Ersilia, impatiently, crossing the room and ringing the bell, "I have not the slightest intention of lying down, and I particularly wish to see the widow Bertrand myself. It is not of the least use to send her to Lebrun; Lebrun wants to keep her on in that old damp cottage that ought to have been pulled down years ago, and I will

not have it. I cannot—I will not consent to be crossed in everything I propose.” Then, as the servant appeared, “Jean,” she said, “send some one to call the widow Bertrand back—she cannot have gone far down the avenue, and show her into the library. I wish to speak to her.”

She stood still for a moment with flushed cheeks and tears of irritation and weakness in her eyes, then left the room. It is in every day events that the tragedies of life for the most part reveal themselves, and Ersilia, though sometimes perplexed over the new duties that had fallen upon her, had generally so much of the calmness and backwardness of a strong nature that does not care to assert its conscious power, that this little incident showed Humphrey, as nothing else could have done, what she must have gone through during the last few weeks.

He understood it still better later on in the evening. Ersilia, out of compunction perhaps for her momentary impatience, submitted to be sent to bed early, and then Mademoiselle Mathilde, glad of an auditor, told Humphrey in her usual trenchant way, much that he could not otherwise have learned.

"Ersilia has been very ill," she said, "she caught cold in some way, and for three days could hardly raise her head, and there is a sort of low fever hanging about her still, the doctor says, though she will go about as usual. She walks, and drives, and writes, does everything in short but eat and sleep. I daresay she was out with you this whole afternoon, Mr. Humphrey."

"Only for an hour," said the lad penitently, "and I did not know—has she heard from Prince Zaraikine, Mademoiselle?"

“Heard? of course she has heard. You don’t suppose he is going to let her alone, now that he has come to life again, and wants money. Not but what he can get that without her help. My brother-in-law provided admirably for that, if for nothing else.”

“Surely he cannot touch her property?” said Humphrey.

“I ‘don’t know what he cannot do,” said Mademoiselle Mathilde; “no, he cannot touch her property, I believe, but he can spend her income, which comes to the same thing. But if that were all, even, one might be thankful. I don’t suppose he could take everything, and at the worst she could come and live with me; I have enough for her and for myself too, now, thank God. If at least he would leave her in peace, as he used to do,—but not at all. He talks of coming here; he wishes to form an establishment

in Paris. His countess is dead; he does not say so in his letters, but I know it for a fact; he is tired of wandering, his health is broken—he wants to be *Grand Seigneur* in short, with Ersilia for a *garde-malade*, and an ornament to his drawing-room.”

“The idea is preposterous,” said Humphrey hastily. “I—all her friends must take measures to prevent her being annoyed.”

“Of course it is preposterous, and yet, if you will believe me, that is one of the things Ersilia is breaking her heart over. You see, Mr. Humphrey,” Mademoiselle Mathilde went on, with more feeling than she often allowed herself to show, “Ersilia has never been like other girls. Most women would have thought themselves well rid of such a husband, but I believe she was absolutely sorry when the news of his death came. She never spoke

to me about it, nor to anyone else that I know of, but one does not live six years with a girl without finding out something of what passes in her mind; and I know, as well as if she had told me, that she had set her heart, as girls will, you know, upon nothing so much as her husband coming back to her. And now he has come back, and everything is altered. Ersilia is what I call a good woman, Mr. Humphrey; I wish I were half as good myself. She has her faults, no doubt—who has not? but what I mean is, she cares more for doing right than for anything else—according to her own notions, of course. Now, she has always had her own notion of what a good wife ought to be, and, as long as she thought her husband was alive, she was as single-hearted as a child. And now that he has come back, she is ready to break her heart because she is in love with somebody else—as if she could help it.”

Humphrey looked at Mademoiselle Mathilde with some surprise. She found out his thought in a moment.

“Yes, I know what you are thinking,” she said, nodding at him. “You are wondering how a silly old woman like me, who is always trying to make the best of the little bit of the world that is left to her, should understand Ersilia so well. But you see I was young myself once, and had plenty of trouble too, and perhaps never expected to be quite such a silly old woman as I have turned out. When we are young we don’t know what we shall be like when we are old, Mr. Humphrey, partly because when we grow old, we don’t feel at all as we supposed we should; you will find that out for yourself some day, if you live long enough. I was never so clever or so good as Ersilia, who has faults all the same, especially just now, poor dear child, when talking to her is

like treading on gunpowder ; still, as I say, I was young myself once, and can understand what Ersilia is feeling, well enough."

"I don't doubt it indeed, Mademoiselle," said Humphrey, ashamed of his momentary thought, "I am quite sure that what you say is true."

"Not but that I think Ersilia carries her notions of things too far," Mademoiselle Mathilde went on, nodding again in acknowledgment of Humphrey's apology, "she is always in extremes, as I tell her. What need, for instance, had she to come and bury herself here, when one can't even mention Mr. Fleming's name without her running out of the room? And he is just as bad at his end, I dare say. She might stay in Paris and see him sometimes, and yet kill no one, so far as I can see. Why should she sacrifice him altogether? He has some claims upon

her, it seems to me, as well as her husband; and for that matter, if everyone were so particular—But I dare not say such things to Ersilia. If I only hint at them, it is as if she would go out of her mind altogether. Do sit down, Mr. Humphrey, I cannot talk to you if you keep wandering about,” for Humphrey had started up and was walking up and down the room. There was nothing in the world that he would not have done to give Ersilia happiness, but this perpetual contemplation of a misery he could move neither one way nor the other to relieve, was maddening. Nor did Made-moiselle Mathilde’s conversation, kind and faithful at heart as she was, tend to soothe his mind; he was glad that she should be silent for a little while.

“I don’t see that anything *can* be done just now,” he said despondingly at last, going back to a former part of their con-

versation, "only when Prince Zaraikine comes back from Belgium, I do think he ought to be prevented in some way from troubling his wife. She is not strong enough to bear it now. And if I can be of the least use, Mademoiselle, you will let me know."

"Yes, yes, I will let you know," she said kindly, "not that I suppose Ersilia would allow anyone to interfere between herself and her husband; otherwise she has old friends who would be willing enough to help her, no doubt. There is her godfather, Colonel Sidney, the father-in-law of her friend, Mrs. Sidney; she has always corresponded with him, and has written to him since she has been here, I know."

"Has she?" said Humphrey, half-vexed; the lad had pleased himself with the thought that as Ersilia's nearest relation, he was the only person to whom

she would turn in case of need. "I never heard of him before," he said, "but in any case you will write to me, Made-moiselle; so long a silence is not to be endured again."

"Yes, I will write," she said, shaking him warmly by the hand, as she wished him good night. "I should have written before, but Ersilia was ill, and there was one thing and another, and I put it off from day to day. But I will write now, Mr. Humphrey, I promise you."

Humphrey was shown to a room at the end of a long corridor looking out upon the avenue. A fire was burning brightly, and the simple furniture, the blue chintz hangings, the brown wainscotting, and the dimly polished floor awakened in him vague, pleasant memories of the little brown room that had been his in his early home. He set his candle on the bureau, and opened the long window to the night.

The air was mild and still, and the deep silence after the hollow echoes of Paris worked in him a strange sleeplessness. Hour after hour he sat at the window, thinking on this day, and on all the days that had gone before, and one by one led up to it. Why had it all been? Why? Why should two people have met, between whom there could henceforth be nothing but separation and an unchanging pain? . . . Who has not in like manner sat questioning fate through midnight hours and found no answer? The fire died out; the moon, which had grown brighter and brighter as the night drew on and the vapours melted away, sank behind the black branches of a spreading oak-tree. The stars came out before the dawn; the cocks shrilly greeted each other from afar, the air grew chill, and still Humphrey sat on, filled with thoughts whose sadness gradually attuned itself to the still gravity of

the long hours. It was not till a footstep was heard in the avenue below, till a waggon came creaking along, and a hundred cheery sounds began to awake, that he flung himself upon the bed for two or three hours of dreamless sleep.

## CHAPTER III.

## ACROSS THE FRONTIER.

HUMPHREY left the Château early, and arrived in Paris about one o'clock. He somehow felt happier than when he went away, more hopeful, more cheerful. He could have assigned no distinct reason for this change of mood, for every fact remained unaltered; but with people of an impressionable turn of mind, facts sometimes play but a shadowy part in the mental landscape, and like moun-

tain-tops are apt to depend upon extraneous influences for their effect of reality. Humphrey, as he travelled back to Paris, was conscious of little but Ersilia's parting look and smile—that exquisite smile which seemed to recognize and appeal to every nobler quality of the lad's heart, and he was ready to believe that, in a world still capable of being so illuminated, everything must in some unimagined way come right, and all be happy yet.

It was with the hope of imparting some of this renewed cheerfulness to Mr. Fleming that he reached the Rue de Clichy and ran upstairs. He had a pass-key, and opened the outer door as usual; but in the entry he was met by old Marguerite, who had been on the watch for him apparently, for she came out of the kitchen as she heard the front door close.

“Ah! here you are,” she said, “I was wondering when you would be back.

I have a message for you from Monsieur. He is gone."

"Gone!" said Humphrey, "what do you mean? Where to?"

"He is gone to Brussels," said the old woman, "he bid me tell you he should be back in two or three days. He left yesterday evening about six o'clock."

Humphrey could not answer. He felt as though every hidden foreboding had suddenly taken shape, and leapt into life. Mr. Fleming gone! gone when he was expecting Humphrey to return with news of Ersilia. Mechanically the lad opened the door of the studio and went in, as though he should find some explanation there.

The studio was as he had left it. The easels stood in their places, Mr. Fleming's painting things were lying about, as he had left them two days before, when he

had gone out to walk in the Tuileries Gardens. He had not touched them since. All was as when Humphrey went away, only on the mantelpiece lay a letter addressed to himself in his master's handwriting. He opened it quickly. There were only a few lines with neither date nor signature, and the writing was blurred and broken, as though traced by a hand too worn out almost to hold the pen.

"I am not mad, Humphrey," Mr. Fleming wrote, "but I shall become so, if I remain any longer at the mercy of the thought that has been torturing me all these weeks. I must see that man, if it is only for five minutes, that I may know his face and remember it. It maddens me that I can form no distinct image of him. Day and night he comes between me and her—and his face is always a blank. All last night he was

in the room with me, watching me, moving when I moved——I am not strong, my boy; these last few weeks have shaken me, I feel. To-night you will be away; I cannot face that horror of darkness again and alone——Darkness I can bear; what else remains for me now? But there is a worse than darkness, in which something moves and is nothing——

“If Mr. Murray should send for the Alcestis, let him have it; it is quite ready. Anything else can wait till my return. I expect to be back in three days at the latest. I only want to see him; then, perhaps, this fever will go of itself, and I shall be better able to endure to the end.”

Humphrey read the letter through twice, and as he read he understood, as though he himself had experienced it, how the dominant thought had grown and grown through these silent weeks till it over-

shadowed every other. Not mad ! Good God ! what then is madness ?

He went out again and called " Marguerite !" The old woman appeared at the kitchen-door, wiping her hands on her apron.

" Did you find a note in there ?" she said. " I forgot to tell you that Monsieur left one for you."

" Yes, I found it," said Humphrey. " Tell me, Marguerite, what time did Mr. Fleming leave yesterday ?"

" He went out first about two o'clock," she said. " I was in and out all the morning to look after the fire, and he never moved or spoke, till about two o'clock he got up all at once and went out without saying a word. I heard him come in again just as it was striking four, and presently he called to me in the kitchen and told me to make him a cup of coffee. When I took it in he was

writing, and about six o'clock he went away."

"And he told you he was going to Brussels?" said Humphrey, "did he say nothing more? How did he seem, Marguerite? Did he look ill?"

"Much the same as usual, Monsieur; dreamy, as if he were not quite sure what he was about; you know his way sometimes. No, he said nothing but what I told you; there was more in the note, though, I daresay?"

"Not much more," said Humphrey, absently. He went back into the studio, and stood reflecting for a minute; then taking up his hat again he ran downstairs, and began walking rapidly in the direction of the Rue de Seine.

On his way he bought a railway guide. He had at once taken the resolution to follow Mr. Fleming to Brussels, and he

was going now to the Rue de Seine to learn, if possible, Prince Zaraikine's exact address from the concierge at his old quarters. He had at once, I say, taken his resolution, and he never wavered for a moment in carrying it out. The precise nature of his fears it might be hard to define; they had all that vagueness of outline which leaves the fullest scope to the imagination. What might he not fear from a meeting between his master and Prince Zaraikine? Every word of M. Rossel's that had betrayed not only an instinctive dislike to Mr. Fleming, but the existence of some distinct private animosity towards him, returned to his memory now.

Randolph never knew, though he might dimly guess in after-years, what the origin of that animosity was. He never knew how M. Rossel had arrived at the knowledge of a story that he had not hesitated to use basely when the opportunity

offered. But that in so using it, he had been animated by something beyond the mere exigency of the moment, Humphrey could not doubt, in thinking, as he had done again and again during these past few weeks, over the blackest hour of his own life. For himself, the first agony of that hour was passed; it was not in the lad's nature to brood in unavailing remorse over a deed that had been effaced so far as is possible by an accepted repentance. But it could never pass from his mind, and there had been another hour, when penetrated to the soul by a noble goodness and generosity, he had vowed a life-long devotion to those who had so come to his help in the darkest moments he had ever known. It was but little he could do, he had thought bitterly more than once since then; but now a great danger, as it seemed to him, had risen before them, and for the sake of

both he resolved that, so far as he could prevent it, no meeting should take place between Mr. Fleming, broken in health and spirits, and a man who had shown himself incapable of one sentiment of scrupulous honour.

Arrived at the Rue de Seine, he found, as he had indeed feared might be the case, that M. Rossel had left no address beyond Poste Restante, Brussels. No matter, he could make inquiries at the different Brussels hotels; of Mr. Fleming at least he would surely hear something, even though Prince Zاراikine should have taken rooms elsewhere.

He went back to the studio to make his last few arrangements. Fortunately he had plenty of money: only two days before, he had received the dividends that represented half his yearly income, so that on that point he had no anxiety. When all was ready, he had still he found

more than an hour to spare, and he employed it in setting the studio in order. He cleaned Mr. Fleming's palettes and hung them up, put away his colours and brushes, and pushed back the easels. He felt as though a long and uncertain journey lay before him from which he might never return. As he went round the room, he came upon a half-embroidered handkerchief, and a little gold-fitted étui lying forgotten under some dusty music that had not been moved for weeks; he recognized them as Ersilia's and put them away carefully in a drawer. Then all at once, with a sort of dismay at his own arrangements, as though a prophecy were speaking through them, he pulled the easels out again into their old places, and set the pictures in their best light; in two or three days he and his master would be back again, and all would be as before.

Old Marguerite put her head in at the door whilst he was still busy. "What are you about?" she said, "you look as if you were preparing for a ball. Are you going away too? What, to Brussels?" Then, as Humphrey nodded, "Wait till I bring you some coffee then, and something to eat as well, or you will be going away without your dinner, as I believe Monsieur did. I never thought of it till he was off."

She came back presently with some coffee and a cutlet. "One would think we were all turned into a flock of wild geese," she said, "who must needs fly one after the other. First Madame goes, poor soul, and then you go after her; then Monsieur goes, and then you go after him. I shall have to go next, and bring you all back again."

"I wish you could, Marguerite," said Humphrey despondently, "but I am afraid no one can do that."

"Courage, courage," she said, "who knows? Only bring Monsieur back first, or he will be falling ill somewhere with no one to look after him. He has been looking like a ghost lately."

Humphrey was tired out, and slept profoundly that night with the relaxation of mind that comes after exertion, when nothing more can be done for a given number of hours. As in a dream he saw the lights flashing on the frontier, and passed through the douane with a procession of sleepy passengers, and he was hardly yet awake when the train rolled slowly into the Brussels station the next morning. He found himself standing on the platform with his travelling bag in his hand, and a bewildering sense of unreality about all that he had done, or was going to do. Then all at once he roused himself and was alive again—more intensely alive, he

thought, than he had ever been in his life before.

He called a carriage, and, jumping into it, desired the coachman to drive to each of the principal hotels in succession; at one or other of them he thought, he must surely gain some tidings. It was a little open carriage that had answered to his call; the weather was unusually mild and bright for February, the streets were already full of passers by, and he drove along with the sense of isolation in the midst of a current of life that overtakes a stranger in an unknown city. The morning sun was shining on the unfamiliar roofs and gables, the more unfamiliar, it seemed to him, that they were so familiar to everyone else; towers and spires glowed in the early beams; the shadows fell across the winding streets. Randolph has often been to Brussels since then, but he still retains, distinct from all other

memories, that first impression of the bright and varied city, an impression of sunshine darkened, as it were, by the increasing pain and anxiety of the passing hours.

It was, in fact, some hours, during which he had visited most of the hotels in the upper and lower towns, before he came upon the desired clue. More than once, indeed, he was told that an Englishman answering to his description, had the day before been making inquiries similar to his own; and each time the words carried a fresh pang to the lad's heart as he seemed to see the forlorn figure of his master wandering to and fro with bent head, and the look in his eyes that Humphrey had often noticed in these last days, and that he knew how to interpret now. But of Prince Zaraikine, or M. Rossel, he could hear nothing. Always, as he drove up

and down the steep streets, he looked eagerly amongst the passers-by, longing and dreading to distinguish one or other of two familiar faces, and always in vain. It was already late in the forenoon when the carriage stopped before the door of almost the last of the hotels that they had not yet visited, a small, second-rate one in the lower town.

“Yes, a gentleman answering to that description had been staying there,” the porter said. “M. Rossel—yes; Monsieur might read his name in the visitors’ book. He had been there for nearly a month, and had left only two days before for Lille. And an English gentleman had been there yesterday inquiring for him, but he had not stayed; he had left again immediately on hearing that M. Rossel was no longer there.”

Humphrey only waited to make sure

that no further information was to be gained; then, getting into the carriage again, he told the coachman to drive to the station for Lille.

Railway communication was less frequent and less direct five and twenty years ago than it is now. There was no train leaving for some hours, no possibility of reaching Lille before ten o'clock that night. An enforced pause, when all our energies are strung to reach a given point, makes us feel as though Fate itself were fighting against us, and had touched our hands to make us helpless. Humphrey had counted with certainty upon seeing Mr. Fleming that day, and sick at heart now with this sudden frustration, with the despairing conviction that these wasted hours would make all his efforts vain, he turned away. He wandered down again into the lower town, he made his way into Ste. Gudule, he lingered about the old

market-place. He remembered standing forlornly in the midst, gazing up at the soaring detail of the Hôtel-de-Ville with eyes that had ceased to see anything but the oak and beech woods, the weather-stained walls and roofs of La Chênaie. Was it only yesterday that he had been there? What long miles, what endless hours, seemed to lie between it and him! And as he thought of Ersilia, he thanked Heaven again, as he had done more than once before, that she at least was spared the suspense of this slow-moving day, which seemed to unfold itself reluctantly as a flower conscious of a deadly blight at its core.

He was almost glad when presently the sky clouded over, and it began to rain. He took shelter in a restaurant, and waited there till it was time to return to the station. The evening closed in rapidly, the wind rose, the rain poured down in tor-

rents, dashing against the windows of the train as it flew through the long flats. By the time Lille was reached, it was a perfect hurricane.

Humphrey, too impatient to leave all further inquiries till the morning, had nevertheless foreseen the difficulty he might find in making the round of the city in such weather and at that hour of the night. But chance favoured him. The very first hotel to which he drove proved to be the right one. M. Rossel was there? No, but he had been there only yesterday, might possibly be back again in a day or two; he was gone to Z——, a small Belgian village about twenty miles off across the frontier. And Mr. Fleming had been there also; he had slept at the hotel the previous night, and had left for Z—— that morning.

For the first time Humphrey's heart failed him. It was less that he felt utterly

discouraged than that, as happens to us all in moments of continued hindrance and frustration, he began to question the reasonableness of his own actions. What, after all, had brought him here? Surely Mr. Fleming, who could pursue an end with so much patience and perseverance, might be trusted not to break down now. He might very probably be annoyed by Humphrey's following him, at the very least laugh at him for a foolish boy. So the lad argued with himself for about two minutes, during which he half resolved to give up his enterprise altogether, and take the next train back to Brussels. Then suddenly his doubts and fears returned in double force, and he was entreating the people of the hotel to let him have some sort of vehicle at any price that would take him on to Z—— that night.

It was impossible, they said. No horse, no man, could venture out on such

a night, along rough country roads. Monsieur could sleep at the hotel, and have a carriage at what hour he pleased the next morning. If he left at seven, he might expect to be at Z—— by a little after ten. More than that they could not do.

Humphrey was obliged to submit, and to take the room that was offered him. He remembers the long hours of that night, the sound of the rain in the street, the lamps blown by the wind. At midnight the storm was at its height, but towards morning it subsided, and as Humphrey drove out of Lille, he saw before him a grey watery land stretching clear beneath the low-hanging grey sky. The road crossed the frontier, and penetrated some distance into the country beyond, then turned back again at a wide angle, to approach the frontier once more. Z—— was only five miles from the boun-

dary line, the driver said, but the road wound and turned, and lengthened out the distance.

The horses were fresh and good, but the roads were heavy after the rain, and they made but slow progress. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and a gleam of sunshine was struggling through the clouds, when the first houses of Z—— came in sight. It was a clean-looking place, with one long wide street of white, and blue and yellow painted houses, and the church standing in the midst. There was a military depôt apparently, for about a quarter of a mile outside the village they passed a low white building, with soldiers lounging at the door, and sitting on benches outside. At the other extremity of the street stood the only hotel, the *Aigle d'Or*, also a white building, proclaiming its name in large gold letters on the front. The village ended here; beyond,

a stone-paved road seemed to lead for miles through a stunted forest.

The carriage stopped, and with a beating heart, Humphrey got down and went into the house. The place had a somewhat deserted look; no one came out to meet him, and after waiting for a moment, he opened a door to the left, which he supposed might lead into a public room. He was not mistaken. He found himself in a small, empty *salle-à-manger*, with a door opening into another long room, which crossed this smaller one at right angles. Humphrey went in. There was a billiard-table at one end, a dining-table at the other; a waiter was moving about, and a thin brown man in the dress of a Belgian officer was reading a newspaper. It was to the former that Humphrey addressed himself.

“Had a white-haired gentleman of the name of Rossel, and an Englishman with

a long beard——” He was beginning his usual formula, then stopped short. The officer looked up from his newspaper, and the waiter, an intelligent-looking lad, paused in rubbing up his wine-glasses to exchange glances with him. Humphrey, swift to take alarm, looked from one to the other.

“They have been here,” the boy said slowly. “M. Rossel left early this morning, and the English gentleman is here still—but——”

“For God’s sake speak out,” said Humphrey impetuously, “tell me everything. It cannot be worse than I fear. Is he dead?”

“Not dead,” said the Belgian in a kind voice, and rising, “but we fear dangerously hurt.”

“In a duel?”

They did not speak, but Humphrey read the answer in their looks.

## CHAPTER IV.

## TOO LATE.

HE felt stunned for a moment, for to expect the worst, is only to cheat ourselves into leaving a wide margin for hopefulness. Then recovering himself,

“Where is he?” he said, “I must go to him at once.”

“I think you cannot go just now,” said the officer, laying his hand on the lad’s arm, “the surgeon who was sent for this morning, is with him again. You are some relation? Not his son, I trust?”

"No, no relation," said Humphrey, "he was only the best, the kindest friend ——" his voice broke, and he turned away. "Did you say that he is dangerously hurt?" he went on after a minute.

"I am afraid so," said the officer, "our surgeon was sent for at half-past seven this morning, and I went with him to the ground where the duel was fought. He is a man of great experience, and I could see at once that he thought seriously of the case—it is best to tell you the truth?" he said, looking inquiringly at Humphrey.

"Yes, yes," he answered, "tell me the truth."

"I am glad you are come," the Belgian went on with a kindly compassion in his voice, "for Mr. Fleming seems to be quite without friends here. It is not even known how the dispute that ended so

fatally arose. M. Rossel and the gentleman who acted with him disappeared immediately the affair was over, and no one in the hotel knew what was going on till a man came to ask for assistance."

"The thing is absurd," said Humphrey in mingled anger and misery, "M Rossel must have urged on the quarrel. Mr. Fleming never fought, never would have dreamed of fighting a duel in his life. He is the gentlest and kindest of men. It could not have happened now, if he had been himself, but he has been through great trouble, great grief lately—" He broke off again, as he felt his eyes filling with irrepressible tears. He stood leaning back against the table, grasping it tightly with both hands in the effort to master his emotion, whilst his companion walked with long strides up and down the room.

"Who can have acted as Mr. Flem-

ing's second," Humphrey presently said more calmly, "he cannot have gone on the ground alone, and he is, as you say, quite without friends here,"

"It was a young Frenchman staying in the hotel," said the officer. "I talked with him for a few minutes, and he seemed to me an honourable and kind-hearted young fellow. He remained with Mr. Fleming till the surgeon had arrived, and every possible assistance had been given; then, not wishing probably to be further involved in the affair, he went away. But before going he gave me his card with his address."

The officer took a card from his pocket-book and handed it to Humphrey. It had on it the name Jules Bellair, and an address scribbled in pencil below. That very evening Randolph wrote to M. Bellair begging him to send all the information in his power, and received in

return a statement, which as it was the only trustworthy account he ever had of that fatal night, may be given here.

“The duel was fairly and honourably conducted on both sides,” M. Bellair wrote, “I was not present at the quarrel, but, as I understand, M. Rossel considered himself insulted by some expressions used by M. Fleming. I was staying at the Aigle d’Or for a few days, and had made some acquaintance with M. Rossel on the evening of his arrival at the hotel. He asked me some questions about the neighbourhood, and mentioned in the course of conversation that he had come to Z—— on important business. He was out all the next day, and I saw nothing of him till between eight and nine o’clock, when he came into the *salle-à-manger* and ordered some dinner. There were at that time three other people in the room, myself and two other men playing at

billiards. M. Rossel had hardly finished dining, when M. Fleming came in. He had arrived at Z—— that morning, as I afterwards heard, but he had not been present at the table-d'hôte, and I had not seen him before. He asked for a cup of coffee, and said something in a low voice to the waiter, then, going up to the table, sat down opposite to M. Rossel. His manner and appearance were peculiar, and attracted everyone's attention. He looked perfectly pale and exhausted, and sat with his head resting on his hand, gazing fixedly, yet absently, at M. Rossel, as though he were dreaming. It was not surprising that M. Rossel presently turned sharply round and spoke to him. I was at the other end of the room, and did not hear what was said, and in a minute they began talking in English or German—probably English. I was called away just then, but, returning in about an hour, I

was met by one of the men with whom I had been playing billiards, who told me that there had been a quarrel, and that he believed a meeting was to be arranged between M. Rossel and the Englishman. It was no concern of his, he said, and he should keep clear of it. I went into the dining-room, where I found M. Fleming sitting alone as I had left him, with his head resting on his hand. I spoke to him, and finding, as I suspected might be the case, that he was a stranger without friends in Z——, I offered him my services, which he accepted. I was anxious to arrange the difference between him and M. Rossel, for M. Fleming seemed to be hardly conscious of what he was doing, and I felt convinced that he was suffering either from illness, or from the effect of some severe mental shock; but my efforts were vain. M. Fleming said that he had had no intention of

offending M. Rossel, but he refused to recall any of his words; he also said that he had never been engaged in an affair of this kind before, but that life and death were indifferent to him, and that it might proceed, or to that effect. He left everything to me. I remained with him most of the night; he did not go to bed, and hardly spoke except to answer questions; he sat as though dreaming awake. I left him about two in the morning, and returned at six. The meeting was arranged for seven. We left the house at different times, but I waited for him outside, and we walked together to the appointed place, a cleared opening in the forest about three-quarters of a mile from the hotel. The two parties were on the ground nearly at the same time. Some further efforts that were made to bring about a reconciliation were without effect. M. Rossel showed no eagerness to press

on the duel, but he refused to withdraw without an apology, which M. Fleming on his side would not make. Both fired at the same moment. M. Fleming fired into the air, and dropped his pistol, and almost instantly fell back into my arms. M. Rossel's second came running up, and directly afterwards M. Rossel himself. He said, 'Confound the fool, why did he come in my way?—I had no wish to kill him,' or some such words, and immediately left the ground. I hailed two men who had followed us at a distance, and sent one of them to the barracks for the army surgeon, the other to the hotel. M. Fleming remained with his head resting on my shoulder till assistance came. He was conscious, but spoke only once to thank me for what I had been able to do for him. I was much affected by this fatal termination to the affair; he saw it, and said with a manner so touching that

I can never forget it, 'You are young, Monsieur, and have all the kindness and generosity of youth that we older men value so much. I have a lad at home, who will thank you better than I can, for having filled his place by me to-day.' I thought he spoke of his son, but on reading your letter, Monsieur, I perceived that yours must be the generous heart that was in his thoughts at that moment. He did not speak again till the surgeon arrived. He said then, 'It is of no use, doctor,' and immediately afterwards, 'It is best so ; death is only a moment, but it may set more than one soul free.' He doubtless saw, like everyone else, that the surgeon looked upon his case as hopeless. Immediately on being moved, he lost consciousness. I waited till I saw him being carried towards the hotel, and then left. I would willingly have stayed longer, but I had an important engage-

ment, and any subsequent detention might have been attended by serious consequences to myself and others——”

Humphrey was still looking at the card given him by the Belgian officer, when footsteps and voices were heard approaching. There was a door opening from the *salle-à-manger* on to the hall and the foot of the staircase, and he could see a stout woman, whose dress and appearance showed her to be the landlady, coming down stairs, accompanied by a dark gentlemanly-looking man.

“There is not the slightest hope,” the latter said, addressing the officer. “I have sent for a nurse, who, I hope, will be here in a few minutes, but it is simply a question of time. He is sinking now; it merely depends on the strength of his constitution, how many hours he may live, and till he recovers full consciousness, as

he probably will sooner or later, nothing can be done about sending to his friends."

"That will be unnecessary," said the officer, stepping back, and introducing Humphrey, who was behind him, "this gentleman has just arrived."

The surgeon bowed and looked at Humphrey with keen, intelligent eyes. Humphrey himself had but one thought at that moment, to see his master. "Can I go now to Mr. Fleming?" was all he said.

"You can go," said the surgeon, "but I must warn you to be careful not to rouse him in any way. Every minute of his life depends upon quiet. If you like to go upstairs at once, it is the second door to the left. I will follow you immediately."

Humphrey went as directed. He found himself in a large, barely-furnished room, where Mr. Fleming was lying in a small

iron bed placed near a window. His head was propped with pillows to help his hurried, irregular breathing, his eyes were half closed, his delicate, sensitive hands lay upon the counterpane. The nurse had not yet come, and he was alone for the moment, a loneliness that struck Humphrey to the heart. There are moments in our own and others' lives in which we say, "Is it towards this then that we have all this time been travelling?" and all the past, however diverse, seems all at once to have become only a slow and certain progress towards a fatal consummation. And yet as Humphrey stood now, looking down upon Mr. Fleming, he was less possessed perhaps by the thought that he was dying than by that sense of the immense gulph between life and death which makes us feel that while the loved one still breathes, with however faint a breath, we may yet claim and hold a part in him.

"Why do you say there is no hope?" he said, turning round almost fiercely on the surgeon who had come up to him. "I have seen him look almost as ill as this before. While there is life, there must be hope."

"There is none whatever," the surgeon answered with an accustomed yet not unkindly manner. "It would be worse than useless to try to deceive you. The wound is mortal. We can send to Lille for further advice if you wish, but I assure you that nothing more can be done."

"Yes, I should wish it," said Humphrey more calmly. "I should not like any chance to be neglected. If—if it should be as you suppose," he went on hesitatingly, "how long do you think he has to live?"

"It is impossible to say exactly. Till to-morrow morning, till to-morrow night even—it is not possible to tell beforehand

in these cases. It depends, as I was saying just now, upon the strength of the constitution. But if there is anyone you wish to send for, I advise you to lose no time."

"Yes, there is some one," said Humphrey. "There is no telegraph nearer than Lille, I suppose? Then, if some one can be dispatched at once for the doctor, I will send a message by the same opportunity."

The nurse, a *sœur de charité*, entered at this moment. "This is unnecessary," said Humphrey, "I can nurse Mr. Fleming myself. I have done so before when he has been ill; he likes my nursing."

"An experienced woman is never out of place in these cases," said the surgeon, "you can be as much as you please with your friend, Monsieur, but it is advisable that he should be left alone as little as possible, and if you should be called away,

it would be well to have some one to take your place."

"That is true," said the lad, who was at once irritated and influenced by the calmness of the surgeon's manner, "and I must go downstairs now." He waited for a minute, that he might hear what directions the surgeon was giving to the nurse, and then left the room to see about despatching a messenger as soon as possible to Lille.

He went down to the *salle-à-manger* which was empty now, and, asking for a pen and ink, sat down to write a telegraphic message to be forwarded to La Chênaie. He knew so well, he thought, that Ersilia would wish to be summoned, that the question never for a moment assumed the form of an argument in his mind. He only thought, as he framed his message, how he could best save her trouble and perplexity. He took out his

railway guide and consulted it to see by what trains she could come. It was not necessary, he found, that she should go as far as Lille. There was another station at which she could stop, and though there would still be a drive of eighteen or twenty miles across the country, it would save her three quarters of an hour of railway journey—so he calculated. But no train that she could take would enable her to reach Z—— before eleven o'clock the following night. It was a long time to look forward to in a life that was counted by minutes—the thought passed through Humphrey's mind, but still he did not hesitate; he had a youthful faith in the force of will to accomplish results, and it would have seemed to him impossible that Ersilia should come, and that she should come in vain.

He wrote and despatched his telegram, and then went up to his master's room

again. He sent away the nurse, and, himself undertaking the charge of Mr. Fleming, sat beside him through long silent hours whilst the afternoon light declined over the wide, straight-lined country without. It was already late, and there was only a dim, red twilight in the window when the nurse came back with a candle, followed by the surgeon and the second doctor, who had just arrived from Lille. The consultation was very short, there was nothing to be done; they would keep him alive as long as they could, that was all.

The sudden light in the darkening room, and the movement around him, disturbed Mr. Fleming before the doctors began their examination. He opened his eyes, and his glance moved slowly from one to another till it rested upon Humphrey, and, as it did so, a half-unacknowledged dread of some hopeless, separating change

in his master passed from the lad's mind. Mr. Fleming was quite conscious; only in his eyes was the dim and absent look that tells of slow-approaching death, when the pulses of life beat fainter and fainter to their final pause. He looked at Humphrey inquiringly, but without wonder.

"You here, my boy?" he said feebly, "how is that?"

"I heard you were at Z——, Sir," said Humphrey in a faltering voice, "and I followed you."

"That was kind of you——you have always been a good boy to me, Humphrey." He held out his hand, but said no more until the doctors had left the room. Humphrey, who had followed them to hear the final decision, came back with his last hope gone. He sat down again at Mr. Fleming's side, and laid his head on the pillow beside him with a sob that he could not control.

"My boy," said Mr. Fleming tenderly, "I have been a great fool, but you mustn't make my folly seem worse by grieving over it too much."

"If I had only been here—" said Humphrey.

"You think I should have shown more wisdom?" Mr. Fleming said, smiling faintly. "Well, it may be so—who knows? I should have been glad to have you with me, my boy." He was silent for a while. "You went to La Chênaie," he said then, "tell me about it."

Humphrey told him. He was very weak, and the tears rolled down slowly as he listened. "Everything else was hopeless," he said, "but my death will make life easier for her."

"She will not think so," said Humphrey, with a keen realization of what Ersilia would feel, that effaced all other considerations.

"In time," he said, "in time—" His voice died away with the last words; he seemed too weak almost for any sustained thought, and for a long while he lay silent. Humphrey thought he was dosing, and perhaps he was, but presently he stirred and spoke again.

"I wish she could have come to-day," he said, "the light is better than it has been for some time past..... I wish she could have come." He spoke and moved uneasily; his mind had wandered back to the last days that they had been together.

"She is coming, Sir," said Humphrey, using the first words that came in his wish to soothe him, "at least I have sent to her—and she is sure to come."

"What, here to Z—— do you mean?" said Mr. Fleming, roused for a moment to a fuller consciousness.

“ Yes, Sir, I thought you would wish to see her.”

He half raised himself on the pillows, his pale face flushed with some sudden emotion. “ God bless you, Humphrey !” he said, then sinking back, he closed his eyes and spoke no more. Nor could Humphrey feel sure how much of what had passed he had clearly understood.

Late in the evening the messenger returned from Lille ; he had been directed to wait there for the return telegram from La Chênaie. Humphrey’s message had been addressed to Mademoiselle Mathilde, but the answer came from Ersilia herself.

“ I will come,” it said, “ I will leave Paris by the train that reaches D—— (the station Humphrey had named) at eight o’clock.”

As Humphrey read the slip of paper which told him that Ersilia was indeed

coming, all the doubts and hesitations that had passed him by in the morning, came crowding into his mind. The difficulties of the undertaking, the length of the journey, Ersilia's recent illness, the chance that she might arrive too late—he suddenly felt as though he were responsible for them all. He had gone downstairs to speak to the messenger, and he turned now into the dining-room for a few minutes before returning to Mr. Fleming. His Belgian friend of the morning was there, reading an evening paper. He laid it down, however, as Humphrey came in, and inquired after Mr. Fleming with the same kindly sympathy that he had shown throughout, and the lad was feeling so lonely in the midst of his perplexities, that he could not help relating some of the history of these troubles to his new friend, ending with the message he had sent to the Princess Zaraikine. The

officer opened his eyes when he heard what Humphrey had done.

"It is a long journey for a lady to take on so doubtful a chance," was all he said in answer, however.

"I know," said Humphrey despondingly, "and perhaps I ought not to have sent; only I felt so sure that she would wish to know, and that Mr. Fleming would wish to see her. But I daresay I was wrong."

"Perhaps not," said the officer; "in moments like these, people's feelings count for so much more than the ordinary facts of life, that very likely you have acted for the best. I was only thinking——" he went on with some hesitation, "the husband—Prince Zaraikine is his name? He is not in the neighbourhood now, I suppose?"

"That can make no difference one way or the other," said Humphrey hastily.

"A man who abandons his wife for six years can have no right to claim any sort of control over her actions."

"That may be true, my young friend ; nevertheless a man who cares very little about his wife, may yet care very much ——" He hesitated and broke off.

"What the devil do you mean ?" said Humphrey, flushing up. "You don't mean to insinuate that anything the Princess Zaraikine can do can be open to criticism in any way ? If so, let me tell you, Monsieur, that this is language no man can use in my presence without answering to me for it."

"I mean nothing," said the officer in friendly tones, laying his hand on the lad's shoulder, "but to express my good will towards you and towards a lady for whom, from what you have told me, I entertain the deepest sympathy and respect. Doubtless you, who know all the

circumstances, are the best judge of what is best for her interests and happiness, and I am sure they are safe with you."

He shook hands very kindly with the half-reluctant lad, and left the room.

Humphrey went upstairs again, feeling more utterly forlorn and wretched than he had yet done. The nurse went away into the next room for a few hours' sleep, and he remained alone with his master. Mr. Fleming was lying now, as he had done all the afternoon, oppressed and occasionally restless, but too drowsy or too exhausted to speak or rouse himself in any way, and Humphrey, with a chill sense of separation, began for the first time to realize that some doubtful gleam of returning consciousness was all that could ever be looked for again now, and that Mr. Fleming was already where loved voices can only reach us like dim echoes of the passionate emotions that once stirred our

lives. With an impatient misery at the sight of suffering he could not relieve, the lad left his place by the bedside, and went to the window. . . . Humphrey was still too young to look upon death as anything but the destroyer, ready to snatch us and our loved ones from the familiar world. It belongs to later years than his were then, to recognize the benediction of that awful presence, in whose peace misunderstandings die away, estranged friends are one again, and our treasures of love need know no change. As he stood now, leaning his forehead against the chill window-pane, with thoughts that pierced through the darkness lying around the remote country village to a lighted Paris street, an empty studio far away, it seemed to him that his youth had sunk for ever with the red evening clouds below the horizon, and that the starlit heavens above him were only an immense darkness

across which was written in far-off passionless characters the history of all the years that he would have to live and to work without his master.

After midnight the sky clouded over, the wind rose, and the rain came dashing against the windows as it had done the previous night. This outer tumult disturbed without actually arousing Mr. Fleming. He became more restless and uneasy. "Oh, what a night to die on!" he said once or twice with an inexpressible pathos in his voice, and indeed towards dawn he became so much fainter that Humphrey thought death was at hand. He called up the nurse and sent for the surgeon, but the end was not yet. As the daylight strengthened, the immediate oppression passed off, and Mr. Fleming returned to nearly the same state as before.

"He has more strength than from his general appearance I should have thought

possible," said the surgeon, about four o'clock that same afternoon, "it is the way sometimes with these frail-looking men. I should not wonder if he lives now till to-morrow morning."

"Do you think so really?" said Humphrey, "do you think that if I were to leave him for a few hours I should find him alive on my return?"

"I think it very possible," said the surgeon, "I should give him another twelve hours certainly, of gradual sinking, you understand. He will probably die very quietly."

These words decided Humphrey. All day he had been torn by the sense of conflicting duties towards Mr. Fleming and towards Ersilia. He could not bear the thought of being away in those last moments, when those who are leaving us seem to have the stronger claim upon us, that they will claim no more; but neither

could he bear to think of Ersilia's arriving after dark at a strange place, with a long uncertain journey across the country still before her. He resolved now that he would go. The train was to arrive at D—— at eight o'clock, and a little more than three hours of swift driving, which he would know how to secure, ought, he calculated, to bring them back to Z——. He would go.

He went downstairs and ordered a horse. He had been used to riding in his old days of country life, and it would, he thought now, be the quickest way of getting to D——. Immediately on his arrival there, he could procure a post-chaise. Humphrey, who had had little experience in travelling, had no doubts as to the wisdom of this arrangement, which allowed him to spend a few more minutes with Mr. Fleming, but which left him exposed to unforeseen contingencies, and of which

indeed, he had afterwards reason to repent.

When the moment for departure was come, he went to wish his master good-bye. Mr. Fleming was lying very quietly, a little turned on one side, with his face towards the window, through which came the late afternoon light ; only a few minutes before he had asked that the curtain which shaded it should be drawn back. Humphrey sat down beside him on the edge of the bed, and took one of the cold, worn hands in his.

“I am going now, Sir,” he said, speaking as clearly and as cheerfully as he could, “I am going to meet her at D——, but we shall be back again before very long.”

“That is right, tell her I am expecting her,” he said, without moving, but with a faint pressure of the hand. The surgeon was right, he was sensibly weaker in mind

and body than he had been the evening before. "Take care of her, Humphrey," he said, "and God bless you, my boy."

The dim eyes closed, the feeble hand relaxed its hold; Humphrey held it pressed in both his for a moment longer, looking down upon his master with an indescribable tightening of the heart; then, without another word, he left the room.

## CHAPTER V.

“FROM DARK TO DARK.”

D— was only a small wayside station, newly built for the benefit of a large manufactory in the neighbourhood; so Humphrey discovered with some dismay on his arrival. The village consisted of a few houses straggling along the road; the only inn was a small public house. It was not a posting station, he was told; it lay considerably off the main road, and the nearest place at which he could get posthorses was at a large village about

ten miles off, through which he had passed on his way from Z——. To get there he must go by cross country roads, as Monsieur had doubtless remarked. Humphrey had in fact noticed that the roads during the last half of his journey had been villainous, and the directions he had received so confusing that he had felt thankful when he at last saw the lights of D—— lying before him under the star-lit sky. . He was angry now at his own stupidity in not having brought a carriage with him from Z——. The only conveyance the place afforded was a tumble-down vehicle, something between a cart and a gig, with a miserable horse. Humphrey looked at it in consternation, as he thought of Ersilia being jolted along rough country roads; but there was no help for it now. They must do as well as they could till they got to the village above mentioned, and then they could post for the remainder of the journey.

He had timed his ride so well that, some delays notwithstanding, it still wanted five minutes to eight when all his arrangements were completed, the gig harnessed and waiting outside the station, and he himself walking up and down the platform. The train was not punctual—that was not astonishing; but when half past eight came he began to grow impatient, and when the station clock showed that it was nine he grew alarmed, especially as all the porters had disappeared but one, who had settled down into a non-expectant attitude.

Humphrey went up to him, and asked the reason of the delay. Had any accident happened? Not to the train, the man said, but through the late heavy rains there had been a slip in the embankment about forty miles off, and the train could not proceed. He could not say how long it might be detained, for hours perhaps;

it might not come on at all that night; there was no saying at present.

The driver of the carriage came up to know how long he was to wait. Till the train came in, of course, Humphrey said, exasperated, nearly out of his mind at this unexpected delay. The man shrugged his shoulders. He could not keep the horse standing there, he said, it must go back to the stable; when Monsieur wanted him again, he must let him know.

He drove off, and Humphrey remained alone. He paced up and down the platform, thinking of Ersilia watching through the night hours in helpless longing, whilst Mr. Fleming's life ebbed slowly away in loneliness, till he was ready to curse his own folly in sending for her at all, and nearly wild with the sense of his utter inability to do anything for either of them. All he could think of was to cross over to the inn, which stood nearly opposite the

station, and order the best provisions and wine it afforded to be brought over to the railway waiting-room, so as to be ready for Ersilia when she should come; then, feeling as though this preparation were a sort of pledge for her speedier arrival, he flung himself down on a bench to wait. How the hours passed he hardly knew; he was not conscious of sleeping, but perhaps he did, for the shrill whistle of the approaching train came upon him at last with startling suddenness. He sprang up, and went out upon the platform. Lights were flashing, and porters moving about. Humphrey looked up at the station clock. There had been a detention of six hours; it was two o'clock in the morning.

What the delay had been to Ersilia was plainly to be seen in her face, weary, beaten, and of a deathlike paleness as she got out of the carriage. She gave her hand to Humphrey, and her lips parted

as though to speak, but no sound came, and he replied to the unspoken words.

"Mr. Fleming is expecting you," he said, "he bade me tell you so. They were his last words as I came away."

A strong tremor passed through her frame. "Tell me, Humphrey," she said, "is there no hope?"

"No," he said, "none."

He spoke out of his own despair which seemed to tell him what could be borne. He felt the hand, which still lay forgotten in his, quiver helplessly for a moment; then she turned. "Let us go," she said, "this delay has been terrible."

They walked on together towards the waiting room. Behind them, stumbling and sleepy, came the faithful Roberts. "There will be a carriage here in a few minutes," Humphrey said, "the man wouldn't wait till the train came in, but I shall soon knock him up again. The

waiting room is not very comfortable, but you will find some refreshments there. Roberts, see that your mistress takes something; we have a long journey before us still."

He hurried off to the inn, but the driver, when at last awakened, was sleepy and grumbling, and it was nearly twenty minutes before all was ready and he could return to summon Ersilia. She was sitting by the table in the waiting room, in an attitude of enforced quiet, her hands tightly clasped, her forehead painfully contracted in already ineffaceable lines of suffering. She had taken off her gloves, but the food before her was untouched, and she rose at once as Humphrey entered. He put her and Roberts into the little open carriage, and covered them with all the wraps and rugs that he could find; then placing himself opposite to them, they were off.

The night fortunately was clear, and though frosty, perfectly still; the late moon was still above the horizon, and lighted them during the first part of their way. Roberts in her corner was asleep again in a minute, and Ersilia leaned forward to speak to Humphrey.

"Tell me, Humphrey," she said, in a voice jarred with the effort she was making, "what was it? Why is Mr. Fleming in Belgium? What is it that has happened?"

"It was an accident," said Humphrey embarrassed. He had already said so much in his telegram to Mademoiselle Mathilde, but he had given no particulars, and there was nothing he more earnestly desired now than to keep from Ersilia, for a time at any rate, the knowledge that it was her husband who was the cause of Mr. Fleming's death. In his confusion, however, he stumbled on perhaps the

worst words he could have used. "Mr. Fleming was called away suddenly into Belgium on business," he said, "and then there was an accident—a pistol went off—I will tell you all another time."

She grew still paler than before, and leaning back in the carriage asked no more questions. I believe she had no idea of the truth, that her suspicions pointed in another direction altogether, but Humphrey never thought of that at the time. He only felt thankful to be spared telling her the whole story; to conceal that, and the misery of his growing certainty that they should arrive too late at Z——, was all that he cared for just then. Absorbed in these thoughts, they went on for a long way in silence, the wretched horse stumbling over the rough country roads, till a more vehement jolt than usual aroused him, and he stooped down to wrap the carriage rug, that had become loosened,

more closely round Ersilia. She thanked him with eyes that took an expression of concern as they rested on his face.

"How ill you look, Humphrey," she said, leaning forward again and laying her hand on his, "you have been going through a great deal, I know. I do not thank you—it is a common sorrow that we share, is it not?"

The kindness of her voice and manner, the claim of fellowship with him in this hour of her own greatest suffering, overcame the lad. He took her hand, so white, so delicate, so transparent in the moonlight, and raised it to his lips with a sob. He hardly knew what he did. She disengaged it gently, then held it out to him again with a simple movement full of frankness. "And yet I do thank you, Humphrey," she said with a mournful attempt at a smile, "no one would—no one else could have done what you have for him and for

me. I think my heart would break now if I had not you to depend upon.”

He could not answer; he felt as though his own heart were breaking with conflicting emotions, and they went on again in silence. The night grew dark as the moon sank down; now and then they passed a barred and shuttered house; the noise of their wheels seemed the only sound left in a sleeping world. Once, as the horse slackened its speed at a slight ascent, Humphrey jumped down, and—as on a far off summer’s night in the Pyrenees—walked along, his hand resting on the carriage, at Ersilia’s side. Before them, one red light shone through the darkness; it came from a village at the top of the hill, the village where they might at last hope to get post horses for the remainder of their journey to Z—. Humphrey struck a match that he might look at his watch, and his heart sank as he saw

that it was already past four o'clock; what hope remained? He fell behind the carriage for a moment as it climbed the hill. A breeze came shivering amongst the poplars and died away; far off, a dog barked and was silent again; the country lay dark and confused before him, the line of the horizon marked only by the slow-sinking constellations. That sense of wide possibilities which appeals to the imagination in presence of a wide landscape came over Humphrey even then; for a moment a feeling of peace stole into the lad's heart, and the still, spreading darkness seemed one with death that for ever hovers over life to harmonize and reconcile it. Then, all at once, with a keen, sickening pang, the immediate sorrow of the hour returned.

Amongst the fears that had lately been troubling Humphrey, was that of finding the posthouse closed at this early hour of

the morning ; but from this he was soon relieved. The light they had seen from below came from the inn to which their driver took them, and, early as it was, people were already astir. Men were moving with lanterns about the courtyard, a carriage stood there, and horses were being brought out. Some other traveller was on his way. They could have a post-chaise immediately, Humphrey was told in answer to his inquiries, in ten minutes, in a quarter of an hour, as soon as the gentleman who was about to start was gone. If he and Madame cared to go upstairs they would find a room with a fire and lights, and could have anything they might want.

Ersilia would willingly have remained where she was till the carriage was ready, but the driver from D—— was impatient to return, and they were obliged to get out and go into the inn. Roberts re-

mained below, but Ersilia and Humphrey were shown upstairs into a bare comfortless room looking out upon the courtyard. It was empty now, but there were signs that it had been recently occupied ; two dim candles burned on a square table in the centre, some wood was crackling in a stove, and there was a stiff arm-chair pushed back, which Humphrey pulled forward again for Ersilia. She sat down in it, and taking off her bonnet, leaned her head against the hard back, closing her eyes with an air of inexpressible weariness, of despairing patience that had almost reached its limits. Humphrey stood by her for a minute, longing to utter words of hope and comfort that would not come ; then, with a movement of anger at his own helplessness, he went away to the window to watch the proceedings in the courtyard below.

Ten minutes may have passed. Ersilia

had not moved, but Humphrey who from the window could see the travelling carriage before the door still standing empty as when they had arrived, was beginning to grow impatient at the delay, when one of the house-servants came into the room with a card which he gave to Ersilia. She leaned forward towards the light to read it, then flushed up, and became deadly pale again.

"Humphrey, come here," she said in quick faint tones.

She held out the card to him as she spoke. It had on it the name of Prince Zaraikine, and below in a well-known handwriting, a few words begging for an immediate interview.

"You cannot see him, of course," said Humphrey, "I will go and speak to him at once."

"No," she said more firmly, "I cannot see him now——" then, with a change of

voice. "It is too late," she said, "he is here."

There was a sort of ante-room opening out of the inner room in which they were waiting; the servant in going out had left the door between the two open, and Humphrey saw, at the same moment as Ersilia, that some one had come in. Without losing an instant, the lad threw himself into the next room, and closing the door behind him, found himself confronting M. Rossel. There was a minute's pause. The two had not seen each other since the memorable morning when they had parted in the Rue de Seine, and in Humphrey, at any rate, the bitter anger and contempt roused by that hour had not yet spent itself. M. Rossel was the first to speak.

"I didn't expect to see you, Randolph," he said, "I discovered accidentally that my wife is here, but I was not

aware that you were with her. You are both bound on the same errand, I presume."

"Monsieur Rossel," said Humphrey, not stopping to choose his words, "let me beg of you not to go to the Princess Zaraikine now. She is exhausted by a long journey, and in great trouble."

"My good fellow," said the Prince, "if, as I suppose, my wife is on her way to visit Mr. Fleming, you can't expect that I should see her take a step so compromising to herself and to me, without making some effort to stop her."

"You mistake," said Humphrey, too eager for the moment to resent these words, "it was my doing entirely. I found Mr. Fleming at Z—— dying, and I sent for the Princess Zaraikine, as the nearest friend he has in the world. You, Monsieur, who know all the circumstances of the case, should be the last to do any-

thing to distress your wife further at such a moment."

"You go too far, Randolph," said M. Rossel, laying his hand on the handle of the door, "my wife's concerns are mine, and I can allow no one to interfere between us. I don't want to quarrel with you, my good boy, but it is as well that we should understand each other."

"I understand you perfectly, Monsieur," answered Humphrey hotly, "and you are welcome to look upon my impertinence as you please. I am quite ready to take the consequences."

"Nonsense," he said, with a good-humour that exasperated the lad, "I am not going to shoot you, or let you try to shoot me, Randolph; Mr. Fleming was a different matter altogether. Now I must go to my wife; I have no time to lose."

He turned the lock as he spoke. Hum-

phrey felt at once helpless and desperate.

"One moment," he said, setting his back against the door, "if you are determined to add to all the misery with which you have cursed your wife's life, you have the power, of course, and I can't prevent it - only, for God's sake don't tell her it was you who shot Mr. Fleming; she knows nothing about it."

"How do you mean, knows nothing about it?" said M. Rossel, pausing.

"I mean," said Humphrey, "that she knows Mr. Fleming is dying, but she believes that he has met with some accident. I wouldn't tell her the whole truth; I knew it would only add to her trouble, which is heavy enough already."

"I understand—" said the Prince, "well, perhaps it is best so. No, I shall say nothing." He opened the door as he

spoke, and passed on into the next room.

Humphrey followed him.

Ersilia had risen and was standing by the table as they entered, her hands resting on it, her eyes fixed on the door in an attitude of suspense and expectation. Some eager emotion passed like a wave over her pale face as her husband advanced, and paused opposite to her on the other side of the table; but she did not speak, and it seemed a long minute before the silence was broken by Prince Zaraikine.

"It is some years, Madame," he said, "since we last met. I had looked forward to seeing you before long in Paris, but your unexpected presence here has given me that pleasure sooner than I could have hoped for it. You are on your way, if I am not mistaken, to see Mr. Fleming."

“I am,” answered Ersilia. Her first emotion had passed away as her husband began to speak; she simply looked utterly exhausted, sustaining her strength by a visible effort. “Might I ask you not to detain me,” she said; “as you are aware that Mr. Fleming is in this neighbourhood, you perhaps know also that he is dying, and that every minute is of consequence.”

“I have no wish to detain you, Madame,” said the Prince, “on the contrary, I am myself obliged to proceed almost immediately to D——, and, should it suit your convenience, I shall be happy to offer you a seat in my carriage, which is at the door. But as regards Mr. Fleming, he has been, I believe, for some time recognized as your accepted lover, and you would greatly oblige me by abandoning your intention of visiting him.”

The words were spoken in a tone of

calm politeness, but they aroused in Ersilia a spirit that in a less absorbing moment would have been defiant.

"That is not possible," she said at once, her cheeks flushing again, and looking straight before her with clear eyes, "nor, pardon me, do I exactly understand on what grounds you make such a request."

"On no grounds, Madame, but the very natural ones that as your husband I am anxious to prevent your taking a false step which the world will know how to interpret, and which might materially modify our future relations towards each other. As your husband, I imagine I have a right to demand so much."

"It is a right you have neglected too long," she said, "to urge it upon me now. Mr. Fleming is dying; he expects me. Nothing can prevent my going to him."

"I understand," said the Prince, "you defy my authority."

"No," she said more gently, "far from it; but that is not the point. I have been the cause of very great suffering to Mr. Fleming, and he has claims upon me that must be first of all with me now." She hesitated, her whole face changing and quivering as with a rush of new emotions. "Do not misunderstand me," she said, leaning a little forward and with a touch of pleading in her voice, "I could have no wish to defy you, least of all at this moment. There were years in which I looked forward to nothing in my life so much as to meeting you again."

There was a noble tenderness in Ersilia's voice and manner as she spoke these last words that filled Humphrey with a sort of rage of mingled admiration and irritation. He wished now that he had told her everything, that she might have

recoiled from this man, instead of appealing to him.

"Our former acquaintance was so brief, Madame," Prince Zaraikine said in answer, "that, much as I appreciate all that is flattering to myself in such an admission, I own that it surprises me."

"It could not be otherwise," said Ersilia. She paused, and checked herself in something further she was going to say, then went on again rapidly, as though moved by an uncontrollable feeling that had gathered strength through long years of repression. "It could not be otherwise," she said, "there was nothing I cared for so much, and I thought—it was a foolish thought, perhaps, but it came to me when I was only a girl, and it grew to be the clearest part of my life—I thought that love and faithfulness and duty on my part could not fail in time to bring you back to me. I counted on the day when

it should be so. I lived—I tried to live for you alone."

"Such constancy, Madame, is as refreshing by its novelty as it is unexceptionable. But that is beside the question now. Your conduct in Rome was a matter of comparative indifference to me. I had reason to believe, from what I knew of your character, that you would behave yourself creditably under the guardianship of your uncle and my mother; but you were not at the head of my establishment, nor had I at that time any desire that you should be. Now, however, it is different. I propose taking up my residence in Paris, and it would in every way suit me that my wife should take her place in society without a story attached to her name."

"M. Rossel——" said Humphrey, starting forward; but he was checked by Ersilia.

"Hush, Humphrey," she said, with a

faint smile, and laying her hand on the lad's arm for an instant. Then turning again to M. Rossel. "It is too late," she said, speaking calmly, though her lips trembled a little; "it is now many years since I have had a story attached to my name. I was very young when you left me alone at Vienna, but not too young to be made to understand soon what sort of interpretation the world might put upon such an action; nor can you, Monsieur, have been ignorant of it."

"You had, at least, the sense of injured innocence to support you," said Prince Zaraikine, speaking more brusquely than he had yet done; "whatever the world may have said, you must have been perfectly well aware that you were not to blame. I left you because it suited my own convenience, not because you were in fault, and I have not hesitated to say so when the occasion offered. The case,

however, would be different, should the story happen to be a true one."

The words struck her to the heart as Humphrey could see, and if throttling M. Rossel on the spot could have helped her, the lad would have done it with pleasure; as it was, he was obliged to remain passive whilst Ersilia spoke again with white lips.

"Such words cannot affect me now," she said, "I mean, to move me from my purpose—nor, indeed, in any way. There was a time when I cared very much what people thought and said about me, but now it is different. Life is so difficult, even to ourselves who know everything—how can it matter what others, who know nothing, say about it?"

"That is to say," said the Prince abruptly, "you have become indifferent to my honour and your own."

"You are wrong," she said, with pa-

tience and dignity. "Nothing that concerns you can be a matter of indifference to me, nor have I given you any cause to think otherwise. But there can be no question of honour here. Mr. Fleming—he is dying—"

She stopped, her speech cut short by sudden overpowering emotion. Her composure which she had maintained so far by a strong effort, and had thought, perhaps, to maintain till the end, gave way all at once and completely. She stood white and trembling, her hands pressed tightly together in the struggle to recover voice and utterance.

"Our love has been a fatality," she said at last, in broken accents that gathered passion as she went on, "and it is he who has had to suffer. I left him when he most needed me—he gave everything for me, and I would give up nothing for him. I do not know how I can speak or think

of anything else. What has honour, what have appearances to do here? He is dying—his life, his work, all have been sacrificed for me, and I have done nothing—”

There was a minute's silence, then Prince Zaraikine looked at his watch and took up his hat.

“If such,” he said, “is your feeling, I do not know that there is anything more to be said. I am to understand then distinctly, that you do not accede to my request?”

“I cannot,” said Ersilia; “God forgive me if I am wrong—I have cared for nothing so much in all the world as to do right in this matter—but I cannot.”

“In that case, Madame, it is useless to argue the matter further, nor, indeed, have I the leisure to do so now; I have already lost too much time. But you will, at least, not hold me to blame for any

reflections that may henceforward be cast upon your conduct."

He nodded to Randolph and left the room abruptly. Ersilia remained standing for a moment as he had left her, then clasping her hands tightly over her forehead with a mute gesture of misery, sank into her chair and sat motionless. In a minute, however, she started up again.

"Shall we never go, Humphrey?" she said; "this delay is maddening me."

They were off again at last, journeying as before in silence through the darkness. Humphrey knew that all was in vain, that they should arrive too late, and Ersilia, lying back in her corner of the carriage, never moved. The interview with her husband, brief as it had been, seemed to have exhausted all her remaining powers. The carriage rolled swiftly now along the smoother roads, but a pale dawn was in the sky as they drew up at the hotel. The

diligence had come lumbering out of the village as they drove in, and the house was already awake and astir in the chill morning.

"Wait one minute," said Humphrey to his companions, as he sprang out of the carriage. He hurried into the hotel, anxious above all things to learn what had happened before Ersilia should come in. The nurse was the first person he met coming down the stairs, and he read the truth at once in her face; but he had no time to ask any questions, for Ersilia, who had followed him, was already at his side. Her deathlike paleness, startled even Humphrey, as he turned and saw her in the dim light.

"It is upstairs?" she said; "let us go."

"It will be better for me to go up first," said Humphrey, hastily, "to—to prepare him, you know."

"No," she said, "he is expecting me."

She laid her hand on Humphrey's arm as though to detain him, and ascended the stairs at his side. I think she hardly knew what she did, that she had no consciousness left but that of the intense purpose that had brought her so far. "It is here?" she said, as Humphrey paused in the corridor before the door of Mr. Fleming's room, and before he could prevent her she had turned the lock and gone in.

The room was cool, dim, and profoundly silent. A small oil lamp burned on the table, but the window was uncurtained and open to the dawn, and the grey light fell upon the bed, where Mr. Fleming lay dead with a tender and solemn smile upon his face.

## CHAPTER VI.

## ONE MORE PARTING.

ONE bright morning, about three weeks later, the sad party who had made their way to Z—— through that long wintry night, were driving homewards through the Paris streets. Everything looked brilliant and sparkling in the early sunshine; the trees were budding on the Boulevards, there was a scent of flowers in the air, a sort of echoing joyousness all around. The spring had come and was

everywhere, except in some sad hearts whose spring seemed gone for ever.

Ersilia had been detained at Z—— by a severe inflammatory attack brought on by the cold and fatigue of her journey. The hotel accommodation was wretched, the medical attendance not first-rate, and Humphrey had been thankful when, with the first rallying of her strength, she expressed her determination to return to Paris at once. The doctor at first refused his consent to what he called a mad proceeding, but everyone else felt that it was the best thing to be done. A sort of feverish impatience had taken possession of her, alternating with fits of silent apathy. Randolph himself saw her but seldom, but he heard from Roberts that she would sometimes try to pace the room till her strength failed altogether, and then sit for hours with her head resting on the old woman's shoulder.

"Let us go away," she said, again and again, and as soon as she could be moved they went.

Humphrey saw his pale and silent charge safe into Mademoiselle Mathilde's hands, and then took his own way to the Rue de Clichy. Old Marguerite met him with red eyes, and burst into sobs when she tried to speak. Humphrey wrung her hand in silence, and, passing on into the studio, closed and locked the door behind him. No one had been there since he went away; a dusty sunbeam was streaming across the tops of the easels and a bit of blue drapery from which he had been painting, on to the white heap of ashes in the fireplace; all was empty, silent with a silence that seemed as though it would never again be broken. Humphrey sat down, and, laying his head on the table, sobbed like a girl.

It was many days before he saw Ersilia

again. He called indeed regularly to inquire after her, and perhaps she would not have refused to see him had he urged the point; but he never did. He never saw anyone but Mademoiselle Mathilde, with whom he had occasional interviews. The poor old lady was as much broken down as it was in her nature to be by these fresh troubles, and liked to lay before him all the various grievances that went to make in her mind the sum of human woe.

“Ersilia is so changed, poor dear child,” she used to say, the tears starting painfully to her old eyes. “I never saw anyone so altered in my life. She used to be always so sweet and cheerful, and now—it is very different. I should have thought myself that a little change and variety might do her good, but the doctors say she is to be kept quiet, so of course we can have no one in the house, and it is as

cheerful as the day before a funeral. Not that it signifies much now. The best of the season is over, and it has certainly been very different from what I expected. If one could only foresee things, how much better it would have been if we had never gone to the Pyrenees last summer. The baths did me no good at all, and if Ersilia had not met Mr. Fleming she could take her proper place in society, when Prince Zaraikine comes back, at the head of his establishment."

"I cannot say I think *that* would be desirable," said Humphrey, bluntly.

"Not on his account of course, but on hers, poor child. She would be in her proper position, and we should at least know where we are. Whereas now, no one knows what will become of us all. Then people will talk you know, Mr. Humphrey, and there are all sorts of stories about. Of course I don't tell

Ersilia all I hear, but it is very painful, and not at all what I expected when I came to Paris. Not that I wonder at it, after that journey to Z——. I knew what would happen; I warned her of it. ‘You don’t know, Ersilia,’ I said, ‘you don’t know, my dear child, what cruel things people can and will say.’ ‘I do know,’ she said, ‘I have heard such things said of other women, and may God forgive me, I may sometimes have believed them.’ That was all, and off she went. It was perfect madness. For my part, I think she would have done better to remain in Paris from the beginning. If people are to talk, it may as well be about something as about nothing, in my opinion.”

If Humphrey could not sympathise with all Mademoiselle Mathilde’s sentiments, he yet felt scarcely less anxious and perplexed than she did. Prince Zaraikine might make his appearance in Paris any

day, and things could not go on as they were. He himself could do nothing, he felt with some bitterness ; nay, any intervention on his part might be worse than useless. His youth and inexperience made him no match for a man like Prince Zاراikine.

Excepting in these daily visits, Humphrey saw hardly anyone at this time. He had a variety of business on his hands, and he shunned general society, shutting himself up, as far as was possible, alone with his troubles. Only once, as he was walking along a Boulevard, he thought he caught sight of Charlotte Grey, driving past in a carriage piled with boxes. He inquired of Mademoiselle Mathilde, and found that he had not been mistaken. Mrs. Grey was gone to Brussels ; the apartment in the Rue du Helder was shut up ; she would not return to Paris till next winter.

It was a relief to Humphrey to know that there was no chance of his meeting Mrs. Grey, though he was sorry to see nothing more of little Charlotte. But in truth he had not many thoughts to spare just then in that direction. He was much occupied, as I have said. Mr. Fleming had no near relations, and it was on Randolph, in conjunction with his lawyer, that the immediate task of examining his papers devolved. His will bore date about three months previous to his death. It was very short. To the Princess Zairaikine was bequeathed all his personal property, including the contents of his studio, with the exception of some casts and books he had thought might be of value to Humphrey; and to Humphrey, moreover, was left a sum of money that enabled him to pursue his studies henceforward without difficulty, and in the way that best suited him.

A copy of the will was sent to Ersilia, and about a week later Humphrey, calling one forenoon as usual, was met in the hall by Roberts. Her mistress was better, she said, and wished to see Mr. Randolph. Would he come in?

Ersilia was in the drawing-room, lying back in a low arm-chair by the fire. She was very much changed; Humphrey could see that at a glance—a change hard to define perhaps, for she could hardly be paler and thinner than before, but one that made itself felt in air and gesture and expression. She held out her hand, and half sat up to greet him, but sank back again immediately with an air of languor and exhaustion that made the effort to speak in her usual voice the more apparent. A small work-table was beside her, and in her hands some trifle of lace-work and embroidery in which she set the stitches as she talked, hardly raising her eyes.

"I wanted to see you to-day on business, Humphrey," she said, after a few remarks had been exchanged, "I am going to England very shortly, and there are some things that I want to say to you and to do before I leave."

"To England!" said Humphrey.

"Yes," she answered, "my god-father, Colonel Sidney, has arrived. He has had an interview with my hus—— with Prince Zaraikine; I have learnt much that you kindly kept from me for a time, Humphrey, and I cannot—it would be impossible for me to see him at present. I do not know that I can ever see him again. All life is changed to me; fate is cruel, and one may struggle for years only to lose faith and love and one's belief in right and wrong at last, to fail one's self, and to see others fail one."

Her voice jarred, and her hand trembled a little as she took her scissors from

the table, but she gave no other sign of emotion. Humphrey had no words with which to answer her. He was himself struggling to repress all expression of his dismay at her approaching departure. He had never thought of her slipping altogether out of his life in this way. He could not follow her to England; she would have no need of him there, and who could say when she might return?

"What is it that I can do for you?" he said at last.

"I want you to go with me to the studio," she answered at once, "that I may know what is there, and consider with you how everything can best be arranged. You are living there now, are you not?"

"Yes," said Humphrey, who, having given up his room in the Rue de Seine, had in fact, since his return to Paris,

been occupying his master's old apartment.

"Then you will not mind going there with me now. Aunt Mathilde has gone to breakfast with a friend at Passy and has taken the carriage, but I will order one to be fetched at once. Will you ring, Humphrey?" She sat up and began putting away her working materials; her face looked so wan under her ruffled hair that the lad felt a sudden pang.

"Are you sure that you are strong enough to go?" he said anxiously.

"Oh yes, I am strong enough for anything I may have to do. And I think," she said, with the shadow of one of her old smiles, "that I have convinced everyone that I shall be all the better for being allowed to have my own way."

Humphrey, anxious and doubtful though he was, could not oppose her wishes.

further, and they set off. She was still so weak that she was obliged to pause twice in ascending the staircase in the Rue de Clichy, but her courage did not fail her, even when the door was opened, and they found themselves in the familiar room. Humphrey had been working again, with how heavy a heart need not be said, during these last few days, and his painting things were all lying about. He cleared them hastily away, but Ersilia hardly noticed them. She stood still for a moment in the middle of the room, her hand pressed upon her forehead, and then began to walk round slowly, pausing before each picture in turn. There were ten or twelve in different stages of completion, one or two hardly more than sketched in. It was before these last that Ersilia paused the longest; but she did not speak till she came to the *Alceste*, which still stood on an easel in its old place.

her face hidden, her whole frame shaken by a deep convulsive sobbing. In her hand was a half-written sheet of paper, an unfinished note from Mr. Fleming to herself, begun and laid aside perhaps on that last morning when she had sent to him to come to her, and forgotten between the leaves of the writing-case ever since. It was only a trifle, but I think nothing else could so have moved her. The few kind, cheerful words, the familiar handwriting—they had come to her suddenly out of a past whose records she had thought closed for ever.

Her sobs were so terrible that Humphrey, after speaking to her in vain, called Marguerite to his assistance, then stood looking on helplessly till the old woman asking for smelling salts, he rushed away out of the room, out of the house, to the nearest chemist to procure some; anything to be out of sight and hearing of a terrible

sorrow he could do nothing to alleviate. When he came back, Ersilia was already better. Marguerite had got her on the sofa, and her convulsive sobbing had subsided into a grieved weeping like a child's, and for the moment as uncontrollable. In a few minutes, however, she began to recover herself. She sat up, pushed back her hair, and drank a glass of water.

"I believe I must leave all this for to-day," she said then; "you were right you see, Humphrey, and I have only given you trouble." She stood up, shaking all over, and was obliged to lean on him as they went downstairs together. I do not know that she ever entered the studio again.

Humphrey saw her once more before she left Paris. It was two days before her departure. Mademoiselle Mathilde was out, and she was alone when he went in, moving about the library, selecting some of the smaller and more precious

objects that she wished packed away during her absence from home. She looked miserably worn and ill, but more like herself than he had yet seen her since Mr. Fleming's death. The force of the first shock was broken, and with the passing away of the immediate strain something of her wonted strength and energy had returned, something even of her sweet, unselfish cheerfulness. Ersilia was the last woman in the world to forget for any length of time that the living were still with her.

She said very little at first, however. Humphrey had brought her some violets, and sitting down by the fire, she employed herself in putting them into a little crystal cup. As the blue and white flowers fell through her thin fingers, Humphrey could not but remember a day, hardly six months ago, when in that same room Ersilia, with the clear light of love and youthful ex-

pectation in her eyes, had stood and talked to him over her roses. But it was of no use to dwell on the past, and standing opposite to her now, with his elbow on the mantelpiece, he began to tell her his own plans for the future. The lad had been thinking much during the last few days, and, not without pain, had come to some fixed resolutions concerning his future life. The whole of them does not concern us here. A new epoch, a man's life was opening before him out of his past of folly, and darkness, and trouble, and his reflections, he trusts, were not unworthy of the occasion.

He meant to travel during the summer, he told Ersilia now ; he could not bear the thought of his loneliness in Paris after she was gone, and it was his intention to visit some of the art galleries of Europe, studying as he went, and so make his way gradually down to Rome, where he

should pass the winter, he hoped, in hard work. Did she approve of his plan?

"I approve of it very much, Humphrey," she said, looking up at him with clear eyes that seemed to read and to understand all his thoughts; "I think it is the very best thing that you can do."

"I felt sure you would," he said. There was a few minutes' silence. "When are you likely to return to Paris?" Humphrey inquired, presently.

"I hardly know," she said; "I sometimes think I shall never come back to live here again. I am going now to my old home in Kensington; I cannot look beyond that yet."

"And Mademoiselle de Brisac—does she go with you?"

"No," said Ersilia; "she offered to do so, but I cannot have her sacrifice herself to me any longer. She has many friends still in Paris, and this winter has been

very hard for her; she will find life easier when I am gone. My godfather will accompany me to England, and then Mrs. Sidney will come and stay with me for a time."

There was another pause. Humphrey was feeling that these last minutes were too precious to be wasted in ordinary words, and Ersilia sat musing in her old attitude, her cheek resting on her hand. Presently, however, she roused herself and looked up.

"You will write to me sometimes, Humphrey, will you not?" she said, "I shall miss you very much; I shall want to know something of all that you are doing and seeing."

"May I write to you?" he answered, "it will be— there will be no other pleasure for me in life."

"It will be a pleasure to me," she said, "I shall often think of you. And this—

this time will not last always," she went on with an effort, "the days will be less sad for you by-and-by. You will make friends, and you have your work—no, I am not afraid for you."

Her voice trembled a little with the last words. She rose and walked away to the further bookcase, as though to replace some volumes, whilst Humphrey followed her with his eyes. In the midst of her own troubles then, she could still take his future to heart, the lad thought, and for the hundredth time he vowed that no action of his should henceforth grieve or disappoint such sweet and constant kindness. In a minute she came back with a slip of paper in her hand, and a large old vellum-bound volume.

"I had almost forgotten," she said, "one thing I had to speak to you about. I want you to have this Dante, Humphrey. It is an early and rare edition, and one

that my uncle thought of value, I know. It is associated in my mind with some happy hours that will not come again; I should like it to be yours. And this," she said, giving him the paper, "is a list of some volumes of engravings I should also like you to have. I was looking over the catalogue of my uncle's books the other day, and marked those I thought might be of use or value to you. I will look them out, and they shall be sent to you after I am gone."

He took the book from her hands. I suppose he said some words of thanks—he has forgotten.

"As regards the studio, Humphrey," she presently went on, "I wish it to remain as it is—that is, I wish nothing moved away for the present. You will go on occupying it of course while you are in Paris, and afterwards old Marguerite will remain and keep it in order.

Later on, I can decide whether I will have anything moved or not."

"It shall be as you desire," said Humphrey, "nothing shall be touched. And when you have any further wishes in the matter, if you will let me know, I will see that they are carried out. There is nothing on earth——"

He broke off as the door opened, and an elderly, white-moustached man entered with his hands full of papers. He came in from the drawing-room, and paused a moment at the sight of an unexpected visitor. Ersilia, whose face had brightened at his entrance, went up to him, and passed her hand through his arm.

"This is Colonel Sidney," she said to Humphrey, who had moved away from the mantelpiece, and now came forward, "I have been wishing to introduce you to him."

"I am glad to make Mr. Randolph's acquaintance," said Colonel Sidney. He was a man over seventy, with a clever, gentle old face, a slight quaver in his voice, and an odd sort of shy, straightforward manner, with a paternal kindness towards Ersilia. He had been an engineer officer of distinction, but it was now some years since he had retired from the army. His health was bad, and obliged him to spend the greater part of each winter abroad, and he had come now from Naples to arrange his god-daughter's affairs. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Randolph," he said, "I have heard a great deal about you."

He shook hands cordially with the lad as he spoke, but Humphrey, who had taken up his hat, was about to go, when a servant came in with a message for Ersilia. "I will come," she said, in answer; then turning to Humphrey,

"Stay till I return," she said, and left the room.

"I have been to see Prince Zaraikine," Colnnel Sidney began almost immediately, "he is the strangest sort of scoundrel I ever came across. I never in my life met with a man so entirely devoid of the least notion of honour. I don't believe he understands the meaning of the word, or knows when he has done a dishonourable thing. And that sort of gentlemanly exterior that he has, makes it all the worse; one has to find him out. You know him though, I think, Mr. Randolph?"

"Yes, I know him," said Randolph, thinking of when and how he had found out Prince Zaraikine. "What did he say?" he inquired.

"Well, not very much. I daresay he didn't think much of an old fellow like me at first," said the Colonel smiling and

stroking his moustache, "but we came to some sort of terms finally. Unluckily, though he can't touch his wife's fortune or property, no one can prevent his spending every penny of her income if he chooses. But he has agreed to leave certain English rents at her disposal, and though it is not much for her, poor child, it is all we can hope for at present from this disastrous affair."

"I don't believe she will care much about the money," said Humphrey sadly, "if Prince Zaraikine will let her alone. But he talked of wishing her to go back to live with him. In that case there will be no peace for her."

"He doesn't wish it now. He said—I won't repeat what he said; if we had both been younger men, I might have knocked him down," said the Colonel, "but it was to the effect that he had had an interview with his wife, and as he

didn't think that they should suit each other better than formerly, they had better continue to live apart. I agreed to that, and so the matter ended."

There was a few minutes' silence broken by Colonel Sidney.

"Mr. Randolph," he said, "my god-daughter has told me all that you have done for her during this trouble that has fallen upon you, as well as upon her, and she has spoken of you in terms that make me doubly glad that I have happened to meet you to-day. If an old man's friendship is of any use to you, you may rest assured of mine."

"You are too good, Sir," said Humphrey, keenly touched and honoured by this kindness. "I have done very little," he went on, moved by an uncontrollable impulse, "I am not worthy of your friendship, except by a resolution to do my best to atone for a great deal of folly and wrong-doing in the past."

"That is a resolution that may last all of us all our lives," said Colonel Sidney, smiling, "and I don't think the worse of you, my lad, that you have learned to make it so early, and to act upon it. This sad time would have been sadder still for my poor Ersilia, if she had not had you to turn to."

"I am very glad," said Humphrey stupidly. Ersilia had come in while they were talking, and was standing at her godfather's side again, her hands clasped round his arm. Her eyes full of sadness, yet met Humphrey's with their old expression of frank kindness and affection. The sweet light dazzled and confused him. He took up his hat hurriedly.

"I must go," he said. "Goodbye, Colonel Sidney; thank you for your kindness." He turned to Ersilia. "Goodbye and God bless you," he said.

He felt the touch of her hand, he saw a

last smile, and then as he went out into the street, darkness seemed to close around and upon him.

Two days later, Humphrey received the books of which Ersilia had spoken; they proved to be a collection of prints and engravings of the highest value. The gift had an intention beyond any that Humphrey thought of at the time. It was the first step in the renunciation of a long-cherished scheme, well-nigh impossible to fulfil henceforth, and it was characteristic of Ersilia that the recognition of her own broken hopes should take the form of a generous impulse to benefit another.

## CHAPTER VII.

## ABSENCE.

IT was in the last days of April that Randolph parted from the Princess Zaraikine, and it was nearly eighteen months before he saw her again. He spent the following winter in Rome as he had proposed doing, and after the first few weeks had no reason to complain of loneliness. Sterling was there, and one or two more of his Paris acquaintances; Colonel Sidney, too, who did not forget his promise of friendship. Randolph

began then the life that has gone on ever since; he made friends whom he keeps to this day; he sold his first picture, he went into society. . . . He had thought life over perhaps with the death of his master, but life has no such arbitrary endings; and if the lad was often sick at heart with a longing for the kind voice, the generous heart that had been stilled in that far off Belgian village, if a melancholy that it was vain to struggle with, held possession of him and coloured all his days, he kept his troubles to himself, and did his best to learn his work and do it worthily amongst his fellows.

He wrote often and regularly to Ersilia; she was still the strong inspiration of his life, and I suppose there were few of his actions at that time that did not find their spring in the thought of her. Sometimes she answered him, not always;

but he wrote all the same. She liked receiving his letters, she told him; she liked to hear his first vivid impressions of the Rome she knew and loved so well; her old kind interest too in all that he was doing never failed, and her answers when they came were generally comments upon what he said. She rarely wrote of herself, and of her life during these eighteen months Humphrey knew almost nothing, beyond the mere outward facts. Mademoiselle Mathilde joined her in England during the autumn, he heard, and after staying with her for a few weeks, accompanied her on a visit to La Chênaie. Their stay there was short, however. Ersilia returned to England, and soon after the new year, she mentioned in a letter to Humphrey that La Chênaie was let. It seemed to her the best thing to do, she said, writing very sadly, and more fully

than was usual with her when speaking of her own affairs. Monsieur Auguste de Florian was a second cousin of her uncle's, and the estate would belong to him or to his children at her death, so that it was only placing it now in the hands of its future master. He was a kind-hearted and liberal man, and she had no fears as to the well-being of the property; but she felt as though she were forsaking a duty and a trust, and more sad than she could have thought possible at parting from the people she was learning to know and to care for.

"It was much the best thing she could do," Colonel Sidney said when Hnmphrey spoke to him on the subject. "Her husband wanted to turn the place into a shooting box, and set everything upside down. She couldn't have left it in his hands, and she couldn't have lived there

herself; she would never have been free from him and his friends. Now she will know that everything is being properly looked after, and can go there, moreover, whenever she likes."

During the following spring there was some correspondence, as Humphrey afterwards learned, between Ersilia and her husband. Prince Zaraikine was then living in Paris, and either from a desire to torment his wife, as Randolph has been sometimes half-disposed to think, or more probably from a renewed sense of the advantage it would be to him to have a beautiful and accomplished woman at the head of his establishment, he wrote again to propose that she should return to live with him. Ersilia refused, and the letters containing this refusal passed long afterwards into Randolph's hands.

"I cannot do what you wish," she

wrote, "I cannot resume my place as your wife for the mere purpose of fulfilling certain social duties. I should be placing myself in a false relation to you ; I should be assuming an attitude of quiescence and submission, which with the memory of the past between us it would not be possible for me to maintain. Do not think I write this from a feeling of resentment. Such a feeling would be out of place in a matter that lies at the root of my whole life . . . I hold that the tie between us is one that can never be broken. My money I leave willingly with you to dispose of as you will. Should you ever, through illness or distress of any kind, be in real need of me, let me know, and nothing shall prevent my coming to you. But I cannot consent to set myself to act a part I could never feel, merely that the world may look on."

In answer to a second letter from Prince Zaraikine she wrote again.

“You say rightly that my present conduct is at variance with my former protestations; there was a time when I should have acted very differently. Nor do I attempt to justify my decision now; it must stand upon its own merits, and many, no doubt, will hold me to blame. But my life is so ordered just now that it is hardly possible for me to arrive at any conclusion without much confusion and pain; right and wrong are not always set clearly to the right hand and to the left to take or to leave. To follow what one feels to be the truth of one's own nature seems sometimes all that is left to one; I have tried to do so now.”

Of the same date as this last letter were a few energetic lines from Mademoiselle Mathilde, who was at that time with Ersilia.

“I do not know, Monsieur, whether it is your intention to kill your wife, but let me tell you it is what you are doing. She is so weak she can hardly walk from one room to another, or sit up to write to you, and if you persist in showering letters upon her that harass her to the last degree, you may expect soon to hear of her in her grave. This will be greatly to your disadvantage, as you will then lose the use of all her money. In your own interests, then, I would advise you to leave her in peace; it is hardly worth while to risk the enjoyment of an income like hers, for the sake of amusing yourself a little at her expense.”

I do not know whether Prince Zaraikine returned any answer to Mademoiselle Mathilde's arguments, but they were probably not without their effect upon him. From whatever reason, his proposals to his wife were, I believe, never renewed.

It was not, as I have said, till long afterwards that these letters came into Randolph's possession. At the time they were written he had no idea that Ersilia was ill, no suspicion of it beyond an occasional vague uneasiness naturally arising when a longer time than usual elapsed between her letters. That she had never quite regained her former strength he might gather from one thing and another; that she was seriously ill never once entered his mind. It was by Ersilia's own desire, as he learned subsequently, that he was thus kept in ignorance. "It would only trouble Humphrey," she said once, when Mademoiselle Mathilde proposed writing to him, "and I will not have him disturbed at his work. Some day I shall like to see him again, but there is still time enough, I think. He wants to travel in Italy this summer, I know; perhaps I may get better, and then we should have

distressed him to no purpose." She did, in fact, get better in the early summer, and went again on a few weeks' visit to La Chênaie where Monsieur Auguste de Florian was now established with his family. But the change and the journey did her no good, and she was glad to return once more to Kensington.

"I am at home again," she wrote to Humphrey, "for I look upon this as my settled home now, and I am more thankful than I can tell you to have had it to come back to during these past months. No other place could be quite the same to me, so cheerful and peaceful, so full of sights and sounds at once familiar and forgotten. All my childish days seem to come and visit me, from the very earliest dolls' tea-things, and there is not one of them that I cannot now welcome gladly. You, too, have some such memories belonging to the old house; some day I shall ask you to come and see me here—"

Randolph was at Genoa when he received this letter, the last Ersilia ever wrote to him. It was given him, he remembers, as he was going out one evening after dinner, and as he took his walk along the ramparts that overhang the sea, he paused, leaning against the low stone parapet to open it. A ruddy light fell over the paper as he read ; a sunset was flaming up into the sky beyond the lighthouse and the mountains and the sea, a crimson flush reflected in the grey-blue waters ; a steamer was puffing towards the land ; far down in the harbour lights were shining, and in the peaceful glow of that lovely evening hour, Humphrey read the cheerful, playful words that made him feel happy in the thought that she, perhaps, was happier. He has that letter before him now ; the handwriting is a little tremulous here and there ; those words were written in the certainty that death was not very far off, and he had no knowledge of it.

Randolph himself spent the spring and summer in Italy, the autumn in the Tyrol. He had made up his mind for several reasons to pass the following winter in Paris, but when the time drew near for his return, an inexpressible reluctance seized him. He put off going from day to day, lingering on into October in the Tyrolese valley where he was living and sketching. At last the weather broke, and he had no longer any excuse for delay. He made up his packages, bade an unwilling farewell to the little sheltering valley, and two days later found himself once more in the Rue de Clichy. Old Marguerite was there to welcome him, the studio, warmed and lighted, stood open to receive him. No need to dwell on the sad memories that awaited him there; they were memories that were to last him his life.

Humphrey had sent on before him from

Rome, a nearly finished picture that was "to bring him name and fame," he had written to Ersilia. He set it up on an easel on that first evening of his return, and looking at it again with fresh eyes, he felt that his twelvemonth's work had not been thrown away. He was no longer altogether a raw and stumbling student; he was beginning to feel and to know his powers, to understand the bent of his own genius. If he went to England, he would take the picture with him, he thought, that Ersilia might see it. . . . He had hopes, plans, ambitions no doubt like other men of his age, but as he had worked and painted, it was still of her he had thought the most. To see her eyes brighten with a smile, to hear her say, "Well done, Humphrey," still seemed to him worth more than most of the prizes of life. He cared for name and fame most

of all that he might stand before her and say, "I am not wholly unworthy."

Something of all this flitted through the young fellow's mind now, as he stood under the gas-lamp gazing at his picture. He must write to Ersilia, he thought, and tell her of his arrival in Paris. It was a long time since he had heard anything of her—certainly longer than usual as he began to reckon up the weeks in his mind. From herself, indeed, he had not heard since he was at Genoa, but a short letter from Mademoiselle Mathilde had found him in the Tyrol, and others might have missed him in his travels. Perhaps at her own house he might learn some news of the Princess Zaraikine; perhaps even Mademoiselle Mathilde might have returned to Paris for the winter. It was still early in the evening, he would go round at once and see.

He took up his hat and went out, look-

ing with strange eyes at the familiar, lighted streets. Eighteen months is a long time to look back upon at one-and-twenty, when each new sensation makes its own epoch in life, and Humphrey was still young enough to feel a momentary wonder that everything should look so unchanged in a world where so much had changed for him. It seemed to him ages since he had last been there, and yet as he walked along, the past seemed to grow more real than the present. No step of the well-known way but held its eager memory, and as he turned the corner where he had been used to pause and look up, vaguely hoping to see Ersilia at her window, his footsteps stayed of themselves and he looked up once more, with a mingled longing and regret he cannot describe. All was dark and shuttered; that he had expected; but he had not expected the news that awaited him at the concierge's lodge.

Mademoiselle de Brisac was in England, the porter's wife said, and Madame la Princesse was there too now, but she had been in Paris a week ago. She had come over quite unexpectedly, accompanied by only the old *femme-de-chambre*; they had remained six days, and then returned to England. She had no idea what brought Madame over, the woman said; she had gone out the first day, but not afterwards; she had been too ill, she believed, to leave her room. She had looked more dead than alive, and the old *femme-de-chambre*, who was very unhappy about her mistress, had said that she could never be any better, and that the doctor did not think she would live through the winter.

This was the news that met Randolph; it was so unexpected, so bewildering, that the first shock was deadened to him by a feeling of incredulity. There must be

some mistake, he thought. He questioned the woman again, but she held to her story, and had nothing to add to it; and full of alarm and perplexity he left the house. He would write to Ersilia, he would write to Mademoiselle Mathilde, he would start instantly for England, he thought, with growing consternation, as he hurried home. He had not been gone long, but in the interval a letter had arrived for him by the late post. Marguerite gave it to him with an air of triumph.

"See here," she said, "you will thank me for this; it is an English letter, just what you were expecting."

"Let me see," said Humphrey, taking it hastily from her, too much agitated to give the expected thanks. The address was in Mademoiselle Mathilde's handwriting. Good God! was Ersilia—— He tore it open, and the first words dis-

pelled the horrible fear that had seized him.

“My dear Mr. Humphrey,” the old lady wrote, “we suppose, by your last letter, that you are in Paris again by this time, and this being the case, Ersilia asks me to write and say that she hopes you will be able to come and pay her a visit before you settle down to your work for the winter. I also shall be very glad to see you here, as there is no prospect of my returning to Paris at present; but before you come I think you ought to know what Ersilia would not let me tell you before, that her health has been failing rapidly during the last few months, and that you must expect to find her greatly altered. In fact she has never been herself since last spring twelvemonth; and considering all she has had to worry her, and how she has worried herself, I am not at all surprised. If she would keep

herself quiet it would be far better, but she is always doing imprudent things and then breaking down. For my part I wonder she has lived so long; she was always very healthy as a girl, but she is like her poor mother, and has no constitution to speak of. First, there was that journey to Z—— (which I did my best to hinder) which nearly killed her, and now she is but just returned from another journey that she insisted on taking to Paris, when she was only fit to be in bed. But that I must say was entirely Mrs. Grey's fault; a more ill-bred, interfering woman I never knew; I have *quite* changed my opinion of her. She happened to be in London, and called here with that little Charlotte, whom, as you know, I never could bear. She had come through Paris, and her latest news was that Prince Zaraikine, who, as we knew, intended going in August to Aix-les-Bains,

had been detained in Paris by a dangerous illness, that there was not a soul left to look after him, and that she expected every day to hear he was dead. I didn't believe a word of it, and I told her so without hesitation; she was very angry, that little idiot, Charlotte, began to cry, it was a scene that I cannot describe. Ersilia said hardly anything at the time, as is her way, but as soon as Mrs. Grey was gone, she announced that she intended going immediately to Paris. You must understand, Mr. Humphrey, that she had not been out of the house for six weeks, and that she does not even go upstairs now; she occupies the rooms on the ground-floor, next to the sitting-room. You may imagine then our consternation on learning this extraordinary resolution. Even Mrs. Sidney, of whose good sense I have very little opinion, and who I believe in her heart would have had Ersilia

go back to live with her husband on any terms, even she tried to dissuade her. As for me I told her the plain truth. 'It is not the least use your going, my dear,' I said, 'your husband will not see you, you may depend upon it. He wants you when he is well, not when he is ill, and besides, I don't believe a word of Mrs. Grey's story.' It was of no use; she listened to all we said, and then went her own way. You know what Ersilia is; if she once takes a thing into her head— Well, she went, and everything happened just as I had said. Prince Zaraikine was not dying at all, he was only laid up with one of his attacks of rheumatic gout; he didn't want Ersilia, and he refused to see her. As soon as she was able to travel again she came back to England, but she has been more ill since than I ever knew her before. She owns now that she was foolish, but of what use is that when the

thing is done? To-day she is a little better, and is in the sitting-room again. She sends you a great many messages; your old room is ready for you, she bids me tell you, whenever you like to come; she wants to see all your Roman sketches, and to hear all your Roman experiences—”

There was a tremulous postscript added like an after-thought to this queer letter.

“Don’t delay too long, Mr. Humphrey, she is very ill.”

Humphrey had no mind to delay. He packed up his portmanteau again, and left by the early mail train the next morning.

## CHAPTER VIII.

"COVER HER FACE, SHE DIED YOUNG."

IT was already dark the following evening when Randolph arrived in London. A damp fog, a drizzling rain, seemed to meet and wrap him round as he drove out of the lighted station, and this dreary welcome after his long absence from England added to the dull sense of depression that had succeeded to the first excitement of his journey. His mind was busy with many thoughts as the cab slowly made its way along the miles of blurred houses and

lights and trees, and stopped before the door of his old home in Kensington. It was more than three years since he had last been there, and then that door had been closed against him; he had come to see his uncle before going to Paris, and the stern old man, who died only a month later, had refused to bid him farewell. If, like Ersilia, Humphrey had many memories of his childhood and youth connected with the old house, they were not all of them such as he could welcome. His uncle's harshness was not pleasant to look back upon, and latterly Randolph had cared still less to dwell upon his acts of kindness, which seemed ready to rise up and accuse him of past ingratitude. He could not have acted otherwise—so he felt—but that Gordian knot of incompatible conditions that we are ready enough to cut rashly when we are young, is what comes to perplex us most sorely perhaps

when the rashness of youth is gone. Humphrey felt now that he would give much to have parted with the old man in kindness; it was a thought to sadden him even in the midst of newer and keener sorrow, when for the first time after years so full of change he saw his uncle's house again. Only, when the door had opened and he was following the servant across the hall, all such memories faded, and in the rush of present emotion he saw no vision of the past but that of one childish day long ago, when a kind welcome had beamed on him from a child's loving eyes, when a small hand had been held out to comfort and cheer the lonely little stranger.

He was shown into that same sitting-room, with the long windows opening on to the garden. They were closed and curtained now against the mist and rain outside, and the whole room had a more

cheerful and habitable look than formerly. A screen was drawn across the lower end, a book-case was placed in one recess, an Indian cabinet, brought from upstairs, filled up another ; bowls of autumn leaves and flowers were set about, and a fire piled with logs made a glowing centre of light and warmth. On one side of it sat Mrs. Sidney in her long black dress, stitching at some linen work with the swiftness of accustomed fingers ; on the other, reclining on a sofa half-turned round to meet the cheerful blaze, was Ersilia. A reading-lamp stood on a small table at her side, but she was not reading. One hand supported her head, the other lay between the leaves of the half-closed book on her knee, her eyes, clear with a look of intent thought, were gazing before her absently. Humphrey, lingering in the shadow of the screen while the servant went forward to announce him, had one

moment in which to observe this still interior. The next, Ersilia, starting at the sound of his name, looked up with a flush and smile that faded again instantly, and held out both her hands. The young man sprang forward; for a moment neither of them, I think, could speak. Ersilia was the first to recover herself.

"It is good of you to come so soon, Humphrey," she said, "we had not ventured to hope for you yet. How was it you did not write?"

Humphrey explained that he had only arrived in Paris the night before, and had started off again immediately on receiving Mademoiselle Mathilde's letter.

"That is well," she said, "you could not arrive too soon for our pleasure. This is Mrs. Sidney, whom you met once before in Paris, I think. Aunt Mathilde is out just now, but she will be in by seven

o'clock for dinner. She looks forward to seeing you again very much."

She spoke in a perfectly cheerful and natural voice that helped to bewilder Humphrey, to whom, after the poignant anxiety of the last few hours, it seemed like some dream, at once blissful and full of pain, to be standing there, looking at her again. She was not so greatly altered he thought, and then again she seemed to him but a shadowy likeness of her former self. Only when he looked into her sweet unchanged eyes, as he listened to the clear tones which unheard through all these months seemed to be vibrating from some remote past, he felt that the Ersilia of other days was before him.

"Sit down, Humphrey," she said, "bring that armchair nearer the fire; you must be cold and tired after your journey, I am sure, and I want to look at you.

You are changed," she went on after a momentary pause, smiling at him, "but not so much changed as I expected to find you. You have seen and done a great deal since we parted. We shall have long talks together; I always think that people who know and love Italy acquire a new sort of nationality, and have a language apart, known only to themselves."

"I would have come before," said Humphrey, "I only waited for your permission. But I did not even know that you had been ill; no one told me."

"It was my fault," she said; "I would not write myself nor let Aunt Mathilde write, till we knew you were in Paris again. But now all is well, and I hope you will be able to stay with us for a while. We are a houseful of women, but we will do our best to entertain you, and there is the old drawing-room upstairs at your dis-

posal if you have any work to do. Did you bring your picture with you?"

"No," said Humphrey; "I thought of doing so, and I have brought all my sketch-books, but I came away in a hurry at last, and left the picture." He did not tell her what was the fact, that he had felt too stunned and miserable the night before to set about packing it up. Of what use, he had thought, to bring it over when she might be too ill to look at it or to care about it? Now he was vexed with himself.

"I am sorry," she said, "I should have liked to see it; it is long since I have seen any pictures. But you will tell me about it." Her cheeks had begun to flush while she talked, and she leant her head back wearily against the sofa cushion. She had spoken with all her old cordial animation, but with a certain abruptness of manner that was new to Humphrey; the

words seemed to come partly by rote, and to lie, as it were, apart from herself. It was the result of her constant struggle to assume an air of cheerfulness in the midst of pain and suffering, and Humphrey soon got used to it; indeed, I think that with him it presently wore off altogether, but in this first interview it chilled him. These moments of meeting after a long separation are always trying; they seem to reveal for the first time what that separation has been.

"You are tired, Humphrey," Ersilia said again, noticing his dejected look; "it is almost dinner time, and I will inquire whether your room is ready." She rang a bell at her side as she spoke; a dressing bell began ringing in the hall at the same moment; Mrs. Sidney folded up her work, and Roberts came in to attend to her mistress. Mr. Randolph's room was quite ready, the old woman said, if he would be

pleased to go up. She had seen to everything herself.

He went upstairs to the very same room in which he had slept that first night twelve years ago, and which he had always occupied afterwards on his visits to his uncle. It was all freshly swept and garnished now, a newly lit fire was crackling on the hearth, and pretty new chintzes were shining everywhere in the cheerful blaze. Some relics of his boyhood were still there, a few school-books on a set of hanging shelves, some sketches done in his schoolboy days pasted on the walls. Randolph was looking at these last with curious eyes and a heavy heart before unstrapping his portmanteau, when he heard a knock at the door. He opened it, and there stood Mademoiselle Mathilde, looking just the same as when they parted eighteen months ago.

“So you have come, Mr. Humphrey,”

she said, holding out her hand, and then all at once she had the young man in her arms, and was sobbing, hugging, embracing him altogether.

"Have you seen Ersilia?" she said, "have you seen my poor dear child?"

"Yes," said Humphrey, "I have seen her," and with the words all the bitterness of his heart seemed to overflow. He turned his face to the wall, and there was silence for a while—it was the very bitterness of death that swept through Randolph's soul; seeing Mademoiselle Mathilde so unchanged, he realized how everything else was changed. He knew that there was no hope—none.

"Tell me," he said at last to Mademoiselle Mathilde, "what do the doctors say?"

"How do I know?" she answered, "they have said a hundred things, that she would get better, that she would not

get better—they never know what they mean. She was better in the spring, certainly better till those letters came from her husband, and now this last journey to Paris has killed her—not that there was much hope before.”

“What letters?” Randolph inquired, and then Mademoiselle Mathilde, sitting down, told him much of what has already been related in the last chapter. Her husband had murdered her, the old lady said in her vehement way, as surely as if he had taken up his knife to do it. It might be so—Humphrey could not tell, and when Mademoiselle Mathilde began to give him some details of Ersilia’s illness, he hardly listened. When death has raised his hand to strike the loved one, it seems to matter but little which weapon it is that he has chosen for the deed. Only when Mademoiselle Mathilde went on to say how much her poor

dear child suffered, he turned away abruptly.

"Don't tell me," he said, walking up and down the room, "I can't bear it. Good heavens! why did I know nothing of all this before?"

They were still talking when the dinner bell rang, and Mademoiselle Mathilde hastened away. Ersilia did not come into the dining-room, and the meal passed almost in silence. The party was perhaps an ill-assorted one. To Humphrey, tired, depressed with his own sad thoughts, there was something confusing in the presence of the two women in the old red dining-room with its heavy curtains and sideboard, and the silver dish covers he had been used to see reflect his uncle's determined, wrinkled old face. Mrs. Sidney was always a somewhat silent woman, nor had Mademoiselle Mathilde much to say in her presence. She could

not bear Mrs. Sidney, she afterwards told Humphrey in confidence, and indeed he himself had at that time no great liking for this lady, whose character he learned to understand and to appreciate better in after-years. Hers was at once a sad and a happy life, for if the path of self-renunciation that she had chosen amongst the poor and suffering was often hard and difficult, it was at least one undarkened by doubts, unassailed by scruples. She had the unquestioning faith which is sublime when it speaks from experience, and which often brings with it the gift of direct influence over many minds; whilst a loving soul, a gentle charity, kept her from passing too harsh a judgment on those who differed from herself. But she had few interests apart from her own line of thought and action, and Randolph was too inexperienced, too much absorbed

in his own ideas and pursuits in those days, to be in sympathy with such a character as this. He knew moreover that in her judgment, Prince Zaraikine's wish for at least an outward reconciliation should have been a law to his wife, and that she ought to have returned to Paris when he wrote to her to come. Such an opinion on the part of her nearest friend could not, he felt sure, have lightened Ersilia's troubles, and for her sake he felt disposed to resent it. Long afterwards, circumstances and the memory of their common love for Ersilia drew these two closer together, and Randolph, as I have said, came to know and to understand Mrs. Sidney better.

Ersilia was in the sitting-room when they went back there after dinner. The evening was her best time, and she seldom went to her own room till nine or ten o'clock. The days succeeded each other

tranquilly in the tranquil old house. After the first, life began to go on again with Humphrey, and a little hope to revive. Seeing her, as a rule, only at her best moments, he easily let himself be deluded by the belief that she was less ill than he had at first imagined. She generally stayed in her own room till late in the afternoon, and he himself soon took up the habit of being out almost all day. There was something in the house that oppressed him, except when he was with her, and he spent most of his days in town, looking up his old fellow-students, revisiting his old haunts, studying in the National Gallery and the British Museum, with new eyes it seemed to him since three years ago. Coming home through the long lighted streets in the evening dusk, splashing through the rain and mud perhaps, with the roar of carriages in his ears, a peaceful change awaited him, as

he turned in at the old iron gate, and passed through the hall into Ersilia's presence. Her face always brightened when he came in, and her constant kindness, her unfeigned pleasure and interest in his sketches, and in all that he could tell her of his life in Italy, made these hours that he spent with her some of the happiest on which he can now look back. She was somewhat changed he found from day to day; she talked less than formerly, falling readily into long fits of silence from which she roused herself with an effort, and abruptly as I have said. But when she did talk, it was with more unreserve than had been usual with her in old days, and between her and Humphrey there came to be by degrees an absence of constraint, a simple and confiding friendship that had never existed before. If Humphrey ever asked himself why this was, he took care not to answer the question.

A little hope, I say, had begun to revive. He knew that she was very weak, and often suffering, but with time and care, he thought, she would surely get stronger.

That Ersilia herself had no such delusions, Humphrey might easily have gathered if he would from one and another expression of hers. She never but once indeed spoke to him on the subject, but half-unconsciously, perhaps, she had taken up the tone of one whose future lies within narrow limits, and if he blinded himself it was voluntarily. Once, too, he overheard some words that gave him a cruel pain at the time, though he is glad to be able to remember them now. Some words there are that, like psalms heard in a sacred place, recur to us again and again through life with a clinging melody of their own.

He had come in one afternoon rather

earlier than usual. He had been lunching at Hampstead, at the house of one of his former acquaintance, a young fellow of about his own age with a troop of sisters to bid their brother's friend welcome. They were kind and pretty girls, but their joyous spirits oppressed Humphrey as contrasted with the rare and beautiful life that he watched fading from one day to another; he presently left them, and, making his way across London again, reached home about sunset. It was a mild and lovely day after a fortnight of almost constant rain, and passing through the sitting-room, which was empty, he went out into the garden to sketch. Everything looked red and crimson in the evening light, the red smoky sky behind the old brick walls, the apples hanging and dropping on the grass, the dim red and pink chrysanthemums along the narrow flower-beds, where some scarlet leaves

were slowly floating down. Humphrey, seated on a low stone bench set against the house, was trying to catch these varied tints, when he heard voices at the open window of the sitting-room. He could not see the speakers, for an angle of the wall intervened, but he could hear the words falling with a sweet and clear distinctness on the stillness of the evening air. It was Ersilia who was speaking.

“You do not understand, Frances,” she said, “even you do not understand, my dear, for you never could believe in my feeling for my husband. How shall I explain? I think that, when one is very young, one’s feelings are a sort of religion to oneself. Afterwards, when one has failed, it is different. The feeling I had for my husband was a religion to me for nearly six years. I was so young when I married that I saw only one side of

things, and resolution was easy to me. I thought, 'If I am true to him, he will some day repent, he will come back to me,' and I cared for nothing so much as that he should find in me a good and faithful wife—and when he did come back, it was too late."

Her voice shook and broke a little with the last words. Mrs. Sidney made some reply that Humphrey did not hear, and Ersilia spoke again.

"I do not reproach myself," she said slowly, "nor even, so far as I alone am concerned, could I bring myself to wish things had been otherwise. I think no woman could, whose life had once been crowned with the love that was given to me, and I cannot reproach myself now that my thoughts must always dwell most on that noblest life and love that were broken for my sake. And yet it has made my own life seem in some sort a failure.

In all those years of separation it was my ideal to be an honourable, perhaps some day an honoured wife. It was a girl's fancy that any faithfulness on my part could change the character of a man like my husband, but that yearning after the fulfilled duties of what I held to be noblest womanhood was no fancy."

There was a slight pause before Mrs. Sidney spoke again in clearer tones. "I think, my dear, your feeling is morbid," she said then in her gentle voice, "your girlish ideal was partly founded on a mistaken estimate of your husband's character. Your life is no failure because that has failed you."

"It may be so," Ersilia said, "but the feeling remains. I see with clearer eyes in these days; I know now there are some things that cannot be in this world, and to look at things as they really are, and not only as one thinks they ought to be,

"COVER HER FACE, SHE DIED YOUNG." 223

is what it concerns us most to learn in life, I suppose ; but there is a time before that hard knowledge comes to one, that I sometimes think one values most of all. And now," she said, her voice changing a little, "all is over. I am dying, and though death is sweet, I do not greatly desire to die. I have done so little in this life where there is so much to be done ; and if, as I believe, a wider life and loftier ends than any we have dreamed of here, perhaps, await us hereafter, yet I would willingly have remained a little longer in this world that is known to me, and where there are common joys and sorrows that I still might have shared, and helped a little perhaps by sharing."

The clear tones seemed to vibrate and echo, then died away, and there was silence. When Humphrey presently left his seat, and went round into the garden, the windows were closed against the

gathering mists; no one was there.

He went indoors. Ersilia was in the sitting-room with Mrs. Sidney, the lamp was not yet lighted, but the curtains were drawn, the fire blazed brightly, and Roberts had brought in some tea. Humphrey could already have thought those sad words a dream. Ersilia, who had not seen him before that day, greeted him cheerfully. She seemed better than usual, he thought, and presently in the firelit dusk, she went to the long-closed piano, and opening it, began to play one of her old tunes. She played it half through, and then all at once her strength gave way, her hands fell on the keys in a jarring chord. She sat motionless for a moment, then rising came slowly back to the sofa, and lay silently with closed eyes for a long while. Later on in the evening, when she and Humphrey happened to be alone together, she said,

"It is strange to myself how little I have of the craving for death in the sense of rest that one so often hears people speak of. There was indeed a time at the worst when the longing for a darkness that should be unconsciousness, and not a blind struggling without light, was intense. But that has passed, and I think could never return in the same degree. And life is still life, with good work to be done in it. People in their troubles sometimes say they have learned how to die; I think I have learned how to live."

"You will live, you must live," said Humphrey. He got up and went towards her. "You will live?" he said, as though she could have granted his prayer.

She laid her hand on his. "I would willingly live, Humphrey," she said, with an exquisite kindness, "if it were only to

see your future ; but that will not be. I have been wishing, though," she went on after a moment's pause, "to speak to you of that future. I want to tell you about that part of my will that concerns you." Humphrey sat down again, with a dogged resolution to hide the pain her words gave him. "This house and all my grandfather's money come to you, of course," she said, "you know I always thought they should have been yours" (long ago they had spoken together on the subject), "and now I am glad that you will have them. All Mr. Fleming's things I have left to you also ; no one could value them as you will, and if, as you say is your intention, you keep on the studio in the Rue de Clichy, you will have no difficulty in disposing of them."

"I shall always keep it," Randolph answered ; "if I am not always there myself, I shall not let it pass into other

"COVER HER FACE, SHE DIED YOUNG." 227

hands. But I shall be there; I intend to live in Paris."

"I am glad of that," she said, "then I can think of you as still working on there in the future. As regards what remains of my uncle's collection," she went on, "I have directed that it shall be sold, and the money will be devoted to building a new house for the school kept by the Sœurs near La Chênaie. M. de Florian tells me that one is needed; he is not rich, and will be glad of this help. It is not, as you know, what I once wished, but Monsieur de Florian did not enter into my views when I spoke to him on the subject in the summer, so I thought that this was the best thing to do."

"Good Heavens!" said Randolph, impetuously, "it is so hard that you have never been able to accomplish anything you planned and wished for."

"Yes, it has been hard," she said, "I think it is always hard to give up anything one has set one's mind on very much, and some of the things I meant to do seemed to me worth the doing. It had long been a dream of mine that the right understanding of beautiful things might help to widen and ennoble the lives of people who hardly know what beauty means now—I should have liked to be the means of bringing that help to those with whom I had most to do. Perhaps if I had been wiser in every way I might have accomplished more; it is hard to decide how far circumstances, and how far our own characters, mould our lives for us. But I like to think sometimes that the good intentions we could not fulfil never quite perish from off the earth, and if the good thing is done at last, we need not mind too much that is not ourselves, but another who has done it."

There were tears in her eyes as she finished speaking. Mademoiselle Mathilde's voice was heard outside the door, and Humphrey had only time for a few words in answer.

"I swear to you," he said, impulsively, springing to his feet again, "if the occasion ever offers, I will remember your words, and do my best to fulfil them. And it will be your doing, not mine, for I should never have thought of these things if you had not spoken of them."

(Long afterwards the promise was kept—in what way, matters little here.)

Humphrey had arranged to go down into the country the following day, to visit the old farm where he had spent all his earliest childhood. He could not get back till late in the evening, and he had been lamenting to Ersilia that he should see nothing of her all day; but when he went into the sitting-room before starting

the next morning, he found to his surprise that she was already there. She had awakened to one of the fits of faintness and oppression to which she was subject; a painful restlessness had seized her, and she had moved from one room to another in the hope of gaining relief. Humphrey, who had never seen her like this before, was terribly shocked and startled. He wanted to put off his proposed excursion altogether for that day, but Ersilia would not hear of it. "It is nothing," she said, trying to smile; "you will see I shall be well again to-morrow, and then I shall want to hear about all that you have been doing to-day." He had to make up his mind then and there, and half-reassured by her look and words, he went.

Two hours by the railway took him down to the little village near which his old home stood. The farm had passed into the hands of people of whom he knew

nothing, and strange faces met him as he passed through the well-known fields and meadows, but the place itself was hardly altered from what it had been three years before. The people of the house were civil, and Randolph was free to wander all the afternoon about the familiar home where old thoughts and dreams and impressions seemed to rise up and meet him at every step. He lingered by the edge of the stream whose quiet ripple hardly stirred the broad growth of water-lilies; he stood leaning in the sunset on the low meadow fence, listening to the faint, still sounds that came to him from afar across the tranquil country. He had left it all a boy, he had come back to it a man, and as he stood in the old orchard looking up through the thick twisting branches at the twilight sky, he felt that he had become a man through the force of a passionate love for one so pure and

noble that his whole life hereafter should be the nobler and purer for that experience. A yellow moon was rising slowly behind the black hedgerows; before him he could see the gables of the house, a light shining in the window of the little room where he used to sleep; his mother's voice seemed to come sounding through the trees. A kind of sacred peace, of consecration sank into his heart, and has kept the memory of that hour apart from all others.

Randolph reached home between ten and eleven o'clock that night. There had been no earlier train from the remote country village, otherwise his anxiety on Ersilia's account, which had made part of his consciousness all day, would have brought him back much sooner. He felt no actual alarm, for he knew that she was subject to these attacks, which usually passed off in a few hours, leaving her in

much the same state as before; but the uneasiness he had been unable to shake off increased every minute as he drew nearer home. The doctor's carriage was driving away from the gate as he came up to it, and the hall door was not yet closed; he sprang out of the cab, and hurried in. Mrs. Sidney was passing through the hall as he entered; she stopped at once when she saw him, and replied to his unspoken question.

"Ersilia is better," she said, "the attack has been a very severe one, but Dr. X—— has just been here again, and he says he has little fear now of its not passing off as usual."

"Good God!" said Humphrey, "do you mean there has been any danger of its not passing off?"

"There is always that danger now," Mrs. Sidney said sadly; then, as Humphrey stood staring at her in horror.

"I think there is no cause for present alarm," she said, "she is suffering much less now, and Dr. X—— gives us hope that with a quiet night she may be nearly as well as usual to-morrow morning. He is coming again in an hour or two to see how she is going on."

She was moving away, but Randolph stopped her. "There may be no cause for alarm," he said, "but I shall stay up till Dr. X—— comes again, and if—in short, you will let me know how she is."

"I will," she said, "but indeed I think the worst is over now."

She went down a passage that led to Ersilia's room, and Humphrey passed on into the sitting-room. No one was there; it was lighted up as usual, but it had a deserted look, as though unused that day. On the small table by the sofa

where Ersilia's books and work were laid, everything was in order, the work basket closed, the volumes laid together, the table pushed back. A new chill struck upon Humphrey, still cold and shaken by the shock Mrs. Sidney's first words had given him. He shivered all over, and flung himself down into a chair in front of the fire to await the doctor's arrival.

“Is there nothing that I can do?” he said once, starting up as Mrs. Sidney came into the room for a moment. He would rather do anything, he thought, than sit and wait there passively. And yet there was no cause for fear, he told himself again and again—he took up a book, but he could not read; the clock ticked, the half hours passed monotonously. A profound stillness settled down upon the house as the night advanced; once

some one came in to make up the fire, and then there was silence again. It somehow reassured Randolph. Twice he got up and went out into the hall to listen, but no one was moving; there was no sound but the sharp transient noises that make themselves heard in a house after midnight, and he went softly back to his post again.

This silence that seemed to assure him that all was going on well, and the sleepy warmth after a long and tiring day, had their effect on him at last. Without losing the sensation of being awake, he was dreaming that he was in the orchard again at his old home; but it was in the spring night now, the full moon shone overhead, and the trees, white with blossom, cast scattered shadows on the grass below. A nameless peace and joy possessed his soul; he saw his mother coming towards

him with her clear, brown, shining eyes, and then he saw Ersilia approaching through the trees; her hands were filled with the blossoms, her face was more fair than in her happiest days. "You have come at last, Humphrey," she said in her sweet, kind tones. They sounded close to his ear; he awoke, starting from his chair, and found himself facing old Roberts.

"What is it, Roberts?" he said, hastily; "your mistress is not worse?"

"Oh, Sir, much worse," said Roberts, the difficult tears of age moistening her old eyes; "Dr. X—— has just been here again; he says there has been a great change in the last hour, and that she can't live through the night."

Humphrey staggered back as though he had been struck. What preparation avails to prepare us for such words as

these? In a moment he recovered himself.

"I must go to her," he said, in a voice he vainly strove to control; "I *must* see her again—I—I have not seen her since the morning——"

"Yes, Sir, that's what I came to say, if you'd be pleased to come now. She was asking for you a minute or two ago."

Stunned and dumb, Humphrey followed the old woman into Ersilia's room. The fire was burning brightly, a shaded lamp stood on the table, and Ersilia, wrapped in her blue dressing-gown, was lying on the large, old-fashioned sofa; she had asked to be placed there when she was carried in, and they had not moved her since. Her head lay high, her eyes were open, her hands lay folded loosely before her. The look, at once weary and wistful,

that her face had often worn in the last weeks, was on it now ; she was only twenty-four, but it was a troubled life that was drawing to its close.

Humphrey went and stood by the sofa at her side, but she did not notice him till Roberts, I think it was, aroused her attention. Then she turned her head a little, smiling, and looking at him for a minute with eyes that already seemed to see very far off.

"Good-bye, Humphrey," she said ; "I hope you will be a great painter some day . . . . thank you for all your love and goodness to me——"

Some one led him gently from the room. He went back into the sitting-room, and sank down again in the chair before the fire. Oh God ! those hours of life when we would fain join hands with the loved ones in death !

He was still sitting sunk together over the blackened embers, when they came to tell him that all was over.

## CHAPTER IX.

## CONCLUSION.

“**T**HOSE whom the gods love die young.”  
—To live long years fulfilled with honourable deeds in the familiar world whose sunrisings and sunsettings are known to us, where our little feet trod the daisies, and blossoming trees and spring hedgerows first transmuted life into pure gladness—this is to be blessed. But to die when the heaven of our childhood is still an open vision, when life is still a drama of intensest interest, and death seems less the consummation of fate

my love. The poor child has been very unhappy, thinking she has done me some wrong or injury; she writes me heart-broken little letters, and nothing I can say in return makes the matter quite clear to her. Try to make her understand how free from blame she is, so far as I am concerned, and that all would have been as it is, had she never met my husband."

Humphrey, on his return to Paris, thought it probable he might see Charlotte before long; but on calling in the Rue du Helder, he found that Mrs. Grey was then in Italy, though she was expected back in the course of a few weeks. He put the jewel-case aside, and from time to time he called again to make inquiries. Mrs. Grey was always expected, he was told, till, late in the spring, he heard she was gone to Brussels, and would not be in Paris till the following winter.

He then wrote to Charlotte, telling her that he had the jewels in his possession, and asking her what he should do with them, and received in reply one of her ill-written little notes begging him still to keep them till they should all be in Paris again, which would be, she said, in the course of a few months.

Randolph had almost forgotten the matter, when, as he was passing through the Tuileries gardens one afternoon in the following October, he suddenly met Mrs. Grey. He would willingly have passed her with a bow, but she immediately stopped to speak to him, and he found himself obliged to stop also.

"Is Miss Grey in Paris?" he inquired. "If so, perhaps I may be allowed to call upon her one afternoon soon, and deliver to her the jewel-case about which I wrote, and which the Princess Zarai-

kine begged me to give to her myself if possible."

"Certainly, certainly," said Mrs. Grey, graciously; "she will be delighted to see you again, Mr. Randolph, and the jewels could not have come at a more opportune moment. You have not heard of her engagement, perhaps? that she is going to be married to Prince Zaraikine?"

"What!" said Humphrey. He was speechless for a moment with amazement. "To—Prince Zaraikine," he said, "you cannot be in earnest, Mrs. Grey?"

"Certainly I am in earnest," said Mrs. Grey, "why not? There is some disparity of age perhaps—but that is of little importance. Charlotte is no longer a child; she will be twenty-one in a month or two, and then the marriage will take place. It is high time she should be married, Mr. Randolph; a young woman

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in her position with a large fortune is exposed to so many dangers."

"But—good Heavens!" said Randolph, "you must surely be acquainted with Prince Zaraikine's character. You must know how he treated his wife; he killed Mr. Fleming in a duel; he is a man without principles and without honour."

"As for that," said Mrs. Grey, "I think there are two sides to every story, Mr. Randolph. I can never believe that all the blame attaches to one side, and we know that Prince Zaraikine was *shamefully* neglected during his illness last year. As regards the duel, I have heard something of it—but then you know, Mr. Fleming might have killed him. And Charlotte is quite devoted to him, dear child. The whole story is most romantic. I find now that she almost entirely supported him when he was ill and in concealment in Paris three years ago, and

when his wife left him to starve. I could not imagine where all her pocket-money went to—she always had far too liberal an allowance for so young a girl—and I used to scold her about it, I remember. But now all is explained, and she will be a princess. Her poor uncle would have been delighted, and really with Rose growing up, and coming out in a year or two, you may imagine, Mr. Randolph, how pleased I am to have Charlotte so well settled in life.”

Randolph was silenced, and full of dismay on Charlotte’s account, not unmixed with anger against the girl for allowing herself to be led into such a marriage, he walked away.

Charlotte was at home and alone when Randolph called the following afternoon. He had not seen her for nearly three years, and he was at once struck by the improvement in her whole appearance.

She had grown very pretty; she was nicely dressed, and her manner was much less childish than formerly; a new atmosphere of favour and importance surrounded her, and it was one in which little Charlotte could not fail to thrive and bloom. Only at the somewhat cold greeting Randolph could not help giving her, she flushed and looked up at him in her old way, and the ready tears came into her eyes when he gave her Ersilia's loving message.

"I regret there should have been so much delay," he said, a little stiffly, "the jewels happily are unchanged, but the Princess Zaraikine would probably have worded her message differently had she foreseen under what circumstances you would receive it."

"Oh, Mr. Randolph," said Charlotte, so piteously that Humphrey's heart, which he had with difficulty hardened

against her, began to melt again immediately. "Oh," said Charlotte, "I know how unworthy I am, I know I have made nothing but mischief from the beginning. I made the Princess Zaraikine unhappy, and I did him all the harm I could, so that I thought he would never forgive me. And now he is so kind to me, you cannot think how kind he is, and Aunt Maria is kind too now, and I cannot help being happy, though I shall never, never forget the Princess Zaraikine."

"If you are happy," said Randolph, "you have all that I can desire for you now or in the future, Miss Grey." He hesitated for a moment as to whether or not he should give her a word of warning; but of what use? Mrs. Grey was the girl's responsible guardian, and with her, and Prince Zaraikine, and Charlotte herself against him, Randolph felt that any words of his might be worse than useless.

He held out his hand. "Goodbye, Miss Grey," was all he said, "I hope we shall always be friends, and if I can ever do you the least service, you will remember that it will give me a great deal of pleasure."

"I will, I will," she said. "I shall always remember how good you were to me, Mr. Randolph, and to him too. He has told me that."

Randolph went away sorry, as he had often been before, for the poor little girl, who, if she should live to be a hundred, would never, he felt, gain much wisdom. But he is glad to know that her fate has been happier than might have been anticipated from her girlish antecedents. She married Prince Zaraikine the following Christmas; he was not unkind to her, I believe, and he died at Vienna about two years later, before he had had time to spend all her money. Charlotte

married an Austrian officer shortly afterwards, and in the society of her many babies spent happy years after the troubles of her girlhood. Only last spring, as Randolph was at work one day in the studio, a knock came at the door, and a card inscribed with the name of Adolf von D—— was brought in, followed by a fair, stalwart, yellow-haired youth of eighteen or nineteen. "My mother bade me be sure to come and see you," he said in broken German-French, and as soon as Randolph understood who he was, he gave a hearty welcome to Charlotte's eldest son. He was come to see Paris, he said, and Randolph did what he could in taking him about and helping him during the few weeks that he was there. He was a good-tempered fellow, without too many brains, and it was characteristic of Charlotte that he could not speak a word of English ; she had never taken the

trouble to teach him. Of the circumstances of his mother's early life and first marriage he knew nothing, but he always spoke of her with enthusiasm, and when Randolph showed him a drawing he had made of her in her girlhood, he declared that she was not in the least altered, only grown a little stouter. Charlotte herself, Randolph never has seen, and, indeed, does not greatly care to see again. He is content that the little April face he once knew should remain associated in his mind with some of the sweetest and darkest hours of his life.

Mademoiselle Mathilde returned to live in Paris immediately after Ersilia's death. As often happens with old people, she felt that death less than might have been expected, and, her taste for society soon reviving, she found plenty of amusement and occupation during the remaining years of her life. She also became *dévoté*, and,

her kindly nature asserting itself, gave much time and money to different charities. Only, as she grew older, there was nothing, she declared, that she enjoyed so much as having an hour's chat about her dear child and old times with Mr. Humphrey, as she always called Randolph. She lived not unhappily to a great age, dying peacefully one day at last in her arm-chair.

Lebrun, whom Randolph saw on an occasional visit to La Chênaie, also lived to be very old, and forgetting all the opposition with which he had once vexed his mistress's soul, always spoke of the few months she had lived on her estates as the golden days of his life. Indeed, Ersilia's mistakes, if she ever made any, are forgotten at La Chênaie now, and in all the country she is remembered only as the sweet and beautiful lady, who in the bad fever-season years ago, took the sick into

her own house, and there herself watched by them and tended them with her own hands. If Ersilia herself would fain have left other memories than these, memories of work accomplished, and noble dreams nobly fulfilled, yet these memories also are sweet and worthy, and her name is blessed amongst the people whom she loved.

As regards myself, little remains to be told. Such work as I have done is before the world, and it was not to record my own history that I sat down to write these pages. Of my subsequent life, let those who will, learn what they may from the early pages of this story. My daughter Fanny, when she is old enough to read this record of her father's writing, will still dimly remember the mother whom she lost when she was but six years old. Let her ever cherish the memory of that

mother whom she strongly resembles, and who had a passionate grief in dying at the thought of parting with her little daughter. For myself I say, the tale is told. Those early years took from me something that can never come again, but they left me a memory that I have sometimes held to be the most precious possession of my life.

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